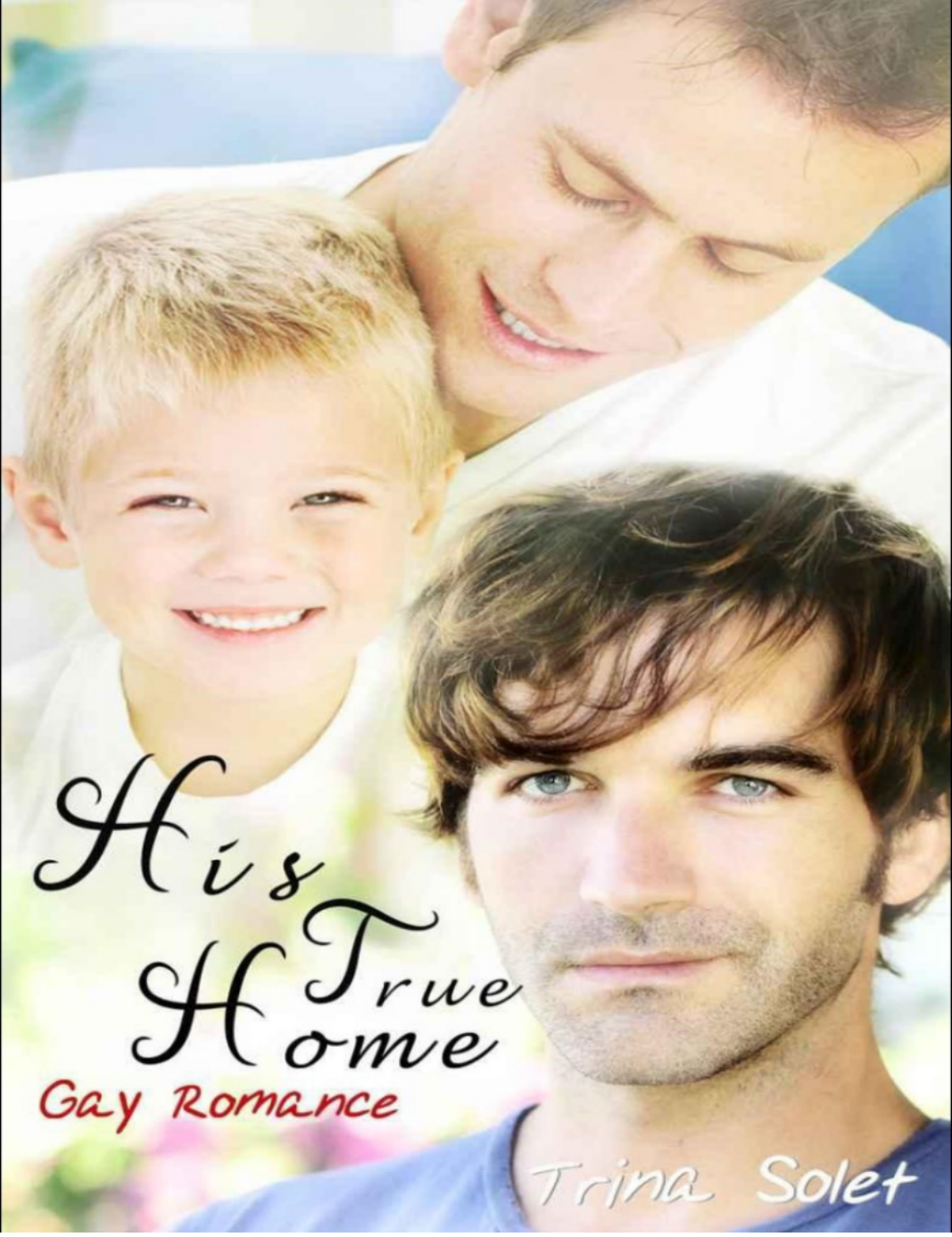
His True Home
Gay Romance
Trina Solet

His True Home (Gay Romance)

By Trina Solet
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His True Home

Gay Romance

Trina Solet

Chapter 1

The little boy stood alone by the side of the road. In his hand, he clutched a model of a yellow cab with its doors glued shut. There was nowhere for several miles that he might have come from. The nearest place was the gas station five miles back.

The boy's blond hair was ruffled like someone had just woken him up and he had sleepily gotten out of bed. His sneakers were in bad shape and one was untied. Next to him was a shopping bag full of his clothes, all of them unwashed. The shopping bag was sitting on the ground as if it had nothing to do with him. When a car sped by, a gust of wind overturned it. It stayed like that, unnoticed, while the child followed the car with his eyes. That car didn't stop, but later on a truck did. At first the old, sky-blue truck went by like it wouldn't stop either. Then, as the boy watched, it slowed down and circled back. It kicked up dirt as it drove off the road to make the turn. The truck came to a stop right next to the boy and its passenger door opened.

*

The bus was moving down a two lane road surrounded by green fields that seemed to shimmer in the sun. With nothing much to see, many of the passengers slept. Looking out the smudged bus window, a young man felt restless, not sleepy. He was slim with dirty-blond hair and expressive hazel eyes. If anyone asked him his name, he would say Cory Bledsoe. But always, somewhere in the back of his mind, there was a voice. It said, "Liar, you don't even know your name." Along with that accusing voice there was also a hope that one day he might find out what his name was.

Weeks ago, his old case worker from social services had called him. That's when Cory found out something even more important than his name.

"Do you ever remember playing with a toy car, a yellow taxi?" Mrs. Fitzgerald asked him.

Cory had played with lots of toy cars. He couldn't remember that one in particular. He couldn't imagine why she would ask. That's when she told him that there might be a connection between him and another abandoned child. A DNA test proved it. Cory was stunned into silence when he heard the news. A brother. He had a little brother. There was another nameless boy out there, alone and probably scared. Except he wasn't alone. That little boy had a big brother named Cory. That's why Cory was on a bus headed to a small town two states away.

Cory's little brother had been left by the side of the road leading to Seaview Pines, a small town a few hours drive from the ocean. Cory had stared at it on the map, determined to go there. Now he was on his way so he could make sure that his brother wouldn't grow up the way he did – always waiting for someone who never came back for him.

Sixteen years ago, Cory was found hungry and crying in a filthy, empty apartment. No one ever came back to claim him, and he grew up in the system until he was eighteen. For the last year, Cory had been alone, with no family, and few friends. Currently he didn't even have a job. Finding a job had been his main concern until he got that phone call. Now all he could think about was the fact that he wasn't alone in the world. Cory was going to show his little brother that he wasn't alone either.

As he stared at the countryside through the bus window, Cory wondered if he was passing the spot where his little brother had been left. He wasn't even sure that the road the bus was taking was the same one. He still couldn't help picturing his little brother standing there, helpless, at the mercy of anyone who happened to pass by. He wanted to take him by the hand, tell him it was OK, and that he now had a big brother to keep him safe.

Only two other passengers got off the bus when it stopped in Seaview Pines. They walked away quickly. Unlike Cory, they knew where they were going. Cory was left to stare around uncertainly, not sure which way to go. He was originally supposed to go to the Town Hall. While on the bus, he got a text telling him to go straight to the mayor's house. "Anyone can tell you where it is," the text said. That wasn't as good as an address though.

Looking up and down the street, Cory could see a dozen buildings each way. The bus had stopped right in front of the tiny post office. Across the street was the sheriff's office and next to it a diner. There were a few people inside the diner but not many on the street. Cory saw a toothless old man smiling at him from the bench under the awning of the post office. Since he was the only person nearby, Cory approached him.

"I'm looking for the mayor's house," Cory said to the man.

The old man mumbled then raised a finger. Next he took something wrapped in a handkerchief out of his pocket. He unwrapped a set of dentures and popped them into his mouth.

"I talk better with my teeth in. You want the Snowfield House. That's right outside of town that way." He pointed the way. "The mailbox will say Honorable Mayor Miriam Benchley."

"Thank you," Cory said. As he headed in that direction, he saw the old man removing his dentures and putting them away.

Walking past small shops and a few empty storefronts, Cory made his way out of town. If it wasn't for the duffel bag he carried, it would have been a pleasant stroll after sitting on the bus for so many hours. The houses he passed were far apart, leaving plenty of room for trees and shrubs to grow wild. Further from the road, he could see fields that had been plowed and had crops growing in rows as well as some that were green or spotted with flowers. Just as he got worried that he was going the wrong way or had missed the mayor's house, he saw the mailbox with the mayor's name.

Set back from the road, at the end of a curving driveway, there was a one story, light blue house surrounded by an unpainted picket fence. Inside the fence was a vegetable garden. Behind the house was a field and further on some woods. Cory followed the driveway, which had two walkways splitting off from it. One went to a small door on the side of the house. The main walkway led Cory to the front door.

Cory found that he had to take several deep breaths before he could bring himself to knock. It didn't help, but he couldn't wait for his nerves to settle. He knocked. No one came to the door at first, but he could hear a man's voice inside. When the door opened, Cory found himself faced with a dark haired guy in his mid twenties. He wore jeans and a paint stained, navy t-shirt. If Cory wasn't already a nervous wreck, this guy would have taken his breath away. He was tall with a strong physique. He had beautiful blue eyes and a wide mouth on the verge of a seductive smile. His piercing eyes looked at Cory questioningly, pinning him in place and confusing him a little. But Cory couldn't let this incredibly attractive man distract him.

"I'm Cory Bledsoe. I'm here to see my brother," he said.

The guy looked surprised, but contrary to that, he said, "We were expecting you. Come in."

"We?"

"I'm Alec Benchley. My mother said you were coming. This is her house."

"The mayor."

"Right. Come in," Alec told him. "You can drop your bag right there." He gestured to a corner.

"And where is my brother?" Cory asked impatiently.

"On the back porch," Alec said as he led the way. "We're calling him Teddy."

"Why Teddy?" Cory asked as he followed him down a hallway covered with paintings and family photos, most of the photos were black and white or faded.

"Because it's better than 'hey, little boy.'"

"So he hasn't told you his name? He still isn't speaking?" Cory had been told about that, but he hoped it wouldn't last.

"Not so far, but he will," Alec said with easy confidence. "There is no medical reason for him not to speak. He's just not ready yet."

Instead of the porch, Cory found himself in the kitchen. The cabinets were painted white but looked like they should have been repainted a while ago. The countertops were some kind of gray stone. The kitchen was pretty messy, and someone had forgotten to close the bread bag. Alec handed Cory a bottle of water from the fridge without asking if he wanted it. By the way Alec leaned on the stove, Cory could tell that he wanted to have a little talk before taking him to meet his little brother.

"I'm not sure how much you know so I'll tell you some of it. He was found five and a half miles out of town on the side of the road with a bag of clothes at his feet and a ten dollar bill tucked into his pocket. He hasn't spoken one word since then. The fingerprints found on his stuff don't match any on record. He doesn't match up with any of the kids who have been reported missing. There's no sign of abuse or injury, but he was a little malnourished."

"That doesn't sound like he was kidnapped," Cory said. His social worker told him the police were looking into that possibility.

"With that bag of his stuff, probably not," Alec said. "The police think it was most likely a parent at the end of his or her rope."

Cory had nothing to say to that. Many times he had tried to imagine the circumstances that would excuse the way he was abandoned in that apartment sixteen years ago. Sometimes they were outlandish and childish, sending his parents on some dangerous adventure, threatened, kidnapped, forced to leave him behind. Other times he could only see indistinct faces turning away. He heard muffled voices making some sort of half-hearted apology before leaving. To think that his little brother had to suffer the same fate broke his heart all over again. Except this time, Cory wasn't the little, helpless boy left at the mercy of strangers. He was family coming to claim the abandoned child, here to say, "You are not alone. You have me."

"Can I see him now?" Cory asked, feeling like he couldn't wait another second.

Alec nodded and took him through a sitting room toward the back of the house. Glass doors opened to a big, shaded porch. A wooden table was on one side with two wicker chairs on the other. The wooden table was sturdy but well worn. Its surface was covered with papers and crayons. That's where a little boy was sitting in a straight-backed chair with two extra cushions to prop him up. He was around five years old. Hunched over, he was busy drawing.

Cory held his breath. Suddenly he was more afraid than he could ever remember being. For a while he just stared through the door as the boy continued to draw. He was so focused on what he was doing that Cory couldn't bear to disturb him.

Since the boy was facing away from them, Cory couldn't really see much of him. He was small and blond and his hair was a little too long. When he heard Alec step out onto the porch, the kid raised his head but didn't turn around.

"Hey, Teddy," Alec said. "Remember how I told you someone was coming to visit you. This is him. His name is Cory." Alec then addressed himself to Cory. "Cory, that's Teddy. He isn't the most talkative kid, but he is good with crayons." While Alec spoke, the little boy remained turned away from them.

"Hi, Teddy," Cory said in the friendliest voice he could manage. He was shaking with emotion, but he kept his voice steady.

"Cory crossed a few states to get here. He'll be staying with us for a while just like you," Alec told Teddy.

Cory looked at Alec with surprise. He hadn't known where he would stay. All he knew was that he wanted to be as close as possible to his brother. Staying in the same house with him was more than he hoped for.

Since Teddy didn't move or acknowledge either of them, Alec motioned Cory back inside. Before leaving Teddy, Alec told him, "We'll let you get back to your drawing. You and Cory will see each other again soon."

Cory waited until they stepped back inside to speak.

"Are you sure it's OK if I stay here?" he asked Alec.

"Where else? There's no motel nearby if that's what you were thinking. You want to get to know Teddy, don't you? This is the best way," Alec said.

Cory frowned but he couldn't really object. It was nice of them to let him stay there, but he felt weird about it especially with Alec being so hot.

"Grab your bag," Alec told him as he went back to the porch where Teddy was still drawing. Once again Teddy straightened but didn't turn to look at him.

"Hey, Teddy. Cory is going to be staying in the small bedroom, the one with the bird pictures. You can help me out and show him to his room. OK?"

Cory smiled at Alec who was obviously just trying to engage Teddy and bring him together with Cory. Teddy didn't respond, but he stood up and came over to stand in front of Cory in the hallway.

"You're in capable hands," Alec said to Cory and went off to sit in what looked like a den. He opened up a laptop and pretended to

ignore the two of them.

Teddy simply waited in front of Cory. This was Cory's first close look at his little brother so he took a moment to memorize him. He looked so small. His hair was kind of shaggy. His mouth clamped shut. He had blue eyes, which were averted, looking down at the floor instead of at Cory. Though he wouldn't raise his eyes, he seemed alert and not afraid.

"You lead the way," Cory told him.

Teddy went back up the hallway and Cory trailed after him, familiarizing himself with the layout. Seeing that Cory didn't move as fast as he expected, Teddy looked a little impatient. The hallway went from the sitting room that led to the back porch on one end to the front door on the other. The den, where Alec was sitting, was the first door to the left. Cory remembered that the kitchen was further on the right. Down the hall were four bedrooms, all of them with their doors open. One of them was clearly Alec's mother's. He could see a woman's robe thrown on the unmade bed and woman's shoes and clothes lying around. Another bedroom had to be Alec's. It was even messier with jeans all over. The open closet doors showed shirts, pants and a few suits on hangers. The mess was on the bottom where shoes were all jumbled together. There was a pile of clothes on a chair, possibly clean, and an overstuffed hamper in the corner. A desk was covered with papers, some of them crumpled. Next to it, a wastebasket overflowed. His bed was also unmade. The extremely disarranged state of the sheets made Cory wonder about how they got that way. Shaking off those unseemly thoughts, he focused on the next bedroom. It was also occupied, or at least half occupied.

"That's your stuff, right?" he said to Teddy.

The boy didn't answer, but the answer was obvious. There were two twin beds in the room. One was only roughly made up like it had been slept in the night before. It had a pair of kid's pajamas draped over the headboard. The other one was neatly made but covered in drawings. Other drawings had been put up on the wall with tape. They were drawings of trees mostly, but when he looked closer, Cory saw there were either tree-houses or birdhouses in some of the trees. The scale was iffy so he wasn't sure.

"They are good drawings," he said to Teddy. "They make me smile."

For a second, Teddy looked at him then looked down again. He hurried off to show Cory his room. It was the smallest room so far. Only a bed and a dresser fit in it. Cory didn't mind at all. All he cared about was that Teddy was right down the hall.

As soon as he walked in, Cory noticed that the walls were covered with sketches and paintings of birds. A bird call outside drew Cory's eye to the small, high window. All it showed him were treetops and

sky. It made him wonder if the room was once a storage room or something. As Cory stared out the window, Teddy looked closely at the paintings of birds. It was as if he was studying them.

"Can you draw a bird?" Cory asked him.

Teddy didn't answer or even shake his head or nod.

"You don't have to answer. Just draw me a picture of one," Cory said.

Teddy looked up at him in surprise, and Cory smiled at him.

"No pressure," Cory said.

Alec showed up in the doorway just then.

"Sorry the room is so small," he said to Cory.

"It's fine. But it could use a few more pictures of birds. Teddy will take care of that," Cory said.

Teddy got a funny look on his face, and Alec grinned at both him and Cory.

"This was my aunt's room when she was a little girl," Alec told them. "She loved birds so my dad drew and painted them for her. On these walls you can see every kind of bird that's found around here."

"Impressive," Cory said and looked at Teddy, who agreed wordlessly. He seemed less withdrawn than he was at first.

"Let's take Cory to lunch and show him the town," Alec said to Teddy.

There was a less hesitant look on Teddy's face when Alec spoke to him. It was natural that he felt more at ease with Alec since he had only just met Cory. Cory still felt a little jealous. He hoped that as they spent time together, Teddy would come to trust him.

They all headed to the front door together, but Alec went back in. As he stood with Cory in front of the house, waiting for him, Teddy looked kind of fidgety.

"It's nice out here," Cory said to him. He meant the disorganized garden where he saw some tomatoes turning from green to yellow as well as a few red ones. The picket fence that surrounded it leaned to one side like it might fall over any minute. The road was yards away and free of cars. Instead of traffic, Cory could hear birds chirping. The terrain was pretty flat along the road, which meandered among trees and bushes. Cory had to look pretty far to spot another house.

For Cory it was weird to be in such an isolated spot, kind of disorienting. The closest thing in his experience was living in a suburb, and that was nothing like this place. He wondered what a guy like Alec was doing living out here. He didn't seem the type, plus Cory was pretty sure he was gay. He had seen that familiar flicker in his eyes when they met. Not that he was going to bring it up. For all he knew, Alec wasn't out.

*

Deciding at the last minute that they should take the car, Alec went in search of his car keys. He took the opportunity to change his paint smudged t-shirt too. After he held some of his jeans upside down and shook them, finally his keys fell out. As he grabbed them off the floor, he looked around his room. The mess in there couldn't have made a good impression on Cory. But why the hell did he care? The only people he needed to impress were social workers. That's when Alec went on a cleaning binge and straightened up the house. The fact was, neither Alec nor his mother were very neat and tidy. As his mother was fond of saying, "A clean house is no place to live." That woman was definitely not meant to be a housewife. After being raised by her, Alec also wasn't meant to be a housewife. Except that all of a sudden he was worried about making a good impression on a guy who was still technically a teenager. That's what came of living in the middle of nowhere. A cute guy showed up, and Alec was ready to start cleaning. Damn if Cory's ass wasn't a work of art and so was everything else that went with it.

When he first saw him, Alec had been surprised. It wasn't that he had any particular expectations about Teddy's brother. He only knew his age and background, that he and Teddy shared a similar history. He definitely didn't expect him to be so cute yet unassuming. He had the same focused, self-contained nature as Teddy. Right now he was focused entirely on his little brother. That gave Alec the opportunity to observe him. He noticed the tiny scar on his sharp jaw and imagined licking it. He memorized the exact combination of colors that made up his hazel eyes. He took a mental impression of the shape of his mouth to make sure it would be a perfect fit wrapped around his cock. He planned the angle at which he would paint him, the same angle as the view of him from above as he fucked him with his head hanging off the bed.

Too bad he was off limits. No. Wait. Good thing he was off limits. Alec wasn't here to fool around, especially not with Teddy's brother. Alec couldn't mess with Cory no matter how much he wanted to see how beautiful he would look when Alec made him come.

Chapter 2

Coming down the front steps, Alec spun a set of car keys around on his finger. Cory took in the sight of his long legs, broad chest, and strong arms. Realizing how hungrily he watched him, Cory averted his eyes. As he did, he caught Teddy giving Alec a questioning look. Answering the look, Alec told him, "Today we drive." Turning to Cory, he explained, "We usually walk into town, but you already walked here and had a long bus ride so we'll take the car."

The car was an older Camaro. Its black paint was a little faded as well as dusty. The bottom of it was splattered with mud. Alec pulled the front seat forward so Teddy could climb into the back and into a child's booster seat.

"Child services said I had to get this contraption," Alec said as he buckled Teddy's seat belt.

Sitting in front, next to Alec, Cory became intensely aware of how tall, hard muscled and attractive he was and only inches away. For a second, Cory almost forgot why he was there. He was overwhelmed with the urgent need to run his hands all over Alec, maybe rip his t-shirt off. He came to his senses quickly and remembered the silent, little guy in the back. Teddy was his priority, not trying to seduce some guy who was out of his league.

To Cory, the road to town didn't seem as long now that he wasn't walking it loaded down with his bag. The area appeared less wild and the houses closer together. There were still plenty of open spaces between them, and Cory noticed the wooded areas in the distance.

As he drove, Alec chatted with Teddy but didn't get any sort of reply. Cory turned to look at Teddy. He was staring out the window but got self-conscious when he saw Cory watching him.

"You guys have to show me all the good places around here," Cory told him.

"The first place isn't so great. It's Thompson's Diner. But we like it OK, right?" Alec said.

Teddy's expression was noncommittal.

"As long as they have fries, I'll like it," Cory said to him.

Teddy seemed to agree on the subject of fries. Cory felt almost like they were playing a game. What's Teddy Thinking? His eyes were the biggest clue. Though he was shy, the expression in his eyes was open and untroubled. Looking at him didn't make Cory worry, and he considered that a good sign. Alec's demeanor also reassured him. He was very casual with Teddy. His manner said loud and clear that Teddy was OK. That was a huge relief to Cory. On the ride to Seaview

Pines, he had been afraid that the little brother waiting for him might be a tiny bird with broken wings. But his wings weren't broken. Though he might not be ready yet, Teddy seemed whole and just waiting for the right moment to fly.

Cory was getting his second look at the town now as they parked in front of the diner. Most of the buildings were clustered around Main Street. None of them were more than two stories. The Town Hall was the most impressive of them. It had a facade that rose to a clock tower.

"So Main Street, that's a real thing," Cory concluded.

"There are almost as many Main Streets as there are small towns. That used to be Benchley Square," Alec said and pointed at the very center of town where the Town Hall was located. "It was named after one of my ancestors who died in WWI. Then around WWII, they renamed it Hero's Square after all the local heroes who served in different wars. There are plaques that list their names. We read all of them, didn't we?" Alec said, turning to Teddy.

Teddy looked proud of this accomplishment. As Cory looked from one end of town to the other, he wondered what it was like to live here. You couldn't exactly get lost in a place like this. You could walk it from end to end in minutes and get to know it in an hour. The place was all familiarity and no excitement, except for Alec. Cory couldn't imagine how a small town like this could contain a guy like him. On the other hand maybe it wasn't a bad place for a kid like Teddy whose life had too many uncertainties already.

Thompson's Diner fit right into the "nothing to see here" theme of the town. It had a plain white front with big windows, and it was as bland inside as it was outside. Beige vinyl seats and beige, mottled tables were lined up next to the windows. The counter had a chrome edge, dulled by scratches. Faded pictures were on the walls. Leading the way to a booth in the middle, Alec waved to a few people who waved at him. As he walked between Alec and Cory, Teddy kept his head down.

Alec and Cory slid into the booth across from each other and let Teddy decide where he wanted to sit. He sat next to Alec. Cory tried not to be disappointed. At least he had a good view of Teddy. As he and Alec looked over the menus, Teddy's stood open in front of him but untouched. Cory wondered about his eating habits.

"How do you know what Teddy likes to eat?" Cory wondered.

"A hamburger is a safe bet," Alec said. "If I'm feeling adventurous, I go with trial and error. If I order the wrong thing, and he leaves most of it on the plate, I know not to order it next time. That's what

happened when I ordered him chili. And I agree with him about the chili."

"I'll stay away from it," Cory said. Seeing Teddy peering at him, Cory smiled. Teddy quickly looked down at the menu.

"I'm having the roasted chicken," Alec announced then looked over at Teddy. "Do you want the hamburger again? We'll ask Rosa to tell them to leave off the onions so you don't have to pick them off."

Teddy looked somewhat interested but not thrilled so Cory had a go.

"Maybe he wants to mix it up today," Cory said and he leaned the menu toward Teddy. "Let's see. I'm looking at these chicken fingers like they have my name on them." Cory watched Teddy's face. He had the impression that Teddy was up for some chicken fingers when his eyes widened slightly. "That's it. Teddy is having the chicken fingers," Cory decided. "And I'm having them too."

"So it's chicken all around," Alec said, closing his menu with a plasticky snap.

After a second's hesitation, Teddy closed his menu the same way.

"Do mine too," Cory said handing him his menu.

"I guess you're ready to order," a pretty, young waitress said as she came up to their table. "Hi, cutie," she said to Teddy, who blushed.

"Right back at you," Alec said, winking at the petite brunette, who was about Cory's age.

"You know I was talking to Teddy. And maybe your new friend a little bit too," she said smiling down at Cory.

He hoped he wasn't blushing.

"Sorry, he's one of mine," Alec said.

Cory looked at him in surprise. That meant that Alec was gay, that he was out, and that he knew Cory was gay too.

"Did you just out me?" Cory asked after Rosa left with their order.

"Sitting across from me pretty much outs you," Alec said.

"Am I that obvious?" Cory wondered more to himself than to get an answer out of Alec.

"Only for about a second," Alec said significantly. He leaned toward Cory. "When you first laid eyes on me, it was written all over your face. But you recovered nicely. If I had blinked, I would have missed it," Alec said as he leaned back with a grin.

"Yes, I find arrogance very attractive," Cory told him. There was no hope in hell that he wasn't blushing now.

As he stewed under Alec's confident grin, Cory saw Teddy looking between them in confusion.

"Do you think Alec is handsome?" Cory asked him.

Teddy looked over at Alec with even more confusion. As he contemplated Alec, his expression turned almost grim.

"Damn," Alec said. He sighed then explained to Cory. "That's the same look he had on his face when he was tasting the chili and picking off the onions." Glancing from Cory to Teddy, Alec asked, "Is Cory good-looking?"

While he considered Cory, Teddy looked thoughtful but not as bad as the chili look.

"What was that one?" Cory wanted to know.

"Pork chop. It was a little dry, but at least he ate it. Lots of ketchup was involved," Alec said, smiling at Teddy.

When Cory smiled at him too, Teddy lowered his head shyly. Cory kept looking at him until Teddy peeked at him. He quickly lowered his head again, but Cory could swear that he was trying not to smile.

Rosa brought their orders and Teddy's arrived with a small salad but Cory's didn't. Alec explained about that.

"That's Teddy's special salad. No onions, no cucumbers. Rosa knows to bring it with every order. Dr. Wheeler said to feed him fruits and veggies and give him gummy vitamins. Right?" Alec asked Teddy.

Teddy didn't look happy to see the salad, but he ate it anyway. Cory remembered that Alec said how Teddy was a little malnourished. He was happy to see that Alec was making sure to feed him some healthy food too. Cory made a note to himself to do the same and resist fried food so he could set a good example. For Teddy, he would give up fried food completely if he had to.

Cory did his best not to watch Alec as he ate. It was really inconvenient that he was so sexy. Plus he had that attitude that said, "I'm a great fuck and ready to prove it." Why couldn't he be some pudgy, balding guy instead of looking like he was built from Cory's fantasies.

While Cory worried about keeping his lust under control, Alec had paid the bill. Though he didn't have much money, Cory was going to offer to pay. From his look, Alec knew what he was thinking.

"Next time," he told him. He totally didn't mean it.

Cory thanked him.

"We should stop by Mom's office before she decides to hunt us down," Alec said as they left the diner.

They walked up the street to Town Hall. Stopping in front, all three of them looked up at the clock tower.

"It's always ten minutes fast," Alec said of the clock. "Mom claims that makes us a town of the future. She can spin anything."

Inside, the Town Hall was pretty modest but with some interesting paintings on the walls. Cory barely glanced at them. He was a little apprehensive about meeting Alec's mother, the mayor, and Teddy's benefactor. He hoped she would be OK with him staying at the house.

The mayor's assistant, a tall redhead, stepped out from behind her desk to greet them. She was almost as tall as Alec. As she gave Alec a kiss on the cheek, he introduced her as Nancy, a high school friend, his mother's hired assassin and all around henchwoman.

"When I start assassinating people, you'll be first on the list," she told him. She turned a friendlier expression to Cory and welcomed him to Seaview Pines.

She poked her head into the mayor's office. After she whispered a few words, Nancy came over to them. "She'll be with you soon. She's on the phone. A few things came up that's why she couldn't meet you," she said to Cory.

As he focused on staying calm so he would make a good impression, Cory noticed Teddy gazing up at a painting.

"That's her," Alec said of the painting of the woman in a red suit. "She looks positively regal."

"Yes, I do," a woman said from behind them. "I was born to wear a power suit."

"Definitely not an apron. Can't cook worth a damn," Alec said as he kissed his mother on the cheek.

The mayor had carefully styled, reddish brown hair and a full figure that looked good in a gray suit. Her eyes were a soft brown, warning Alec to behave. He resembled her only a little. Turning away from her son's teasing, Alec's mother faced Cory. Her look softened instantly.

"I heard the population of Seaview Pines just went up by one." She smiled at Cory with tears in her eyes. "I'm so happy you're here," she said and hugged him.

Alec signaled to her from behind Teddy to warn her that Teddy didn't know who Cory was yet.

"We went to lunch and we're going to walk around a little," Alec told her.

"Wish I could go with you," the mayor said and leaned down toward Teddy. "Make sure Alec doesn't get into any trouble." As Teddy nodded, she cupped his cheek, and he looked up at her.

Cory could tell that he liked her. If she was the way she seemed to Cory, he wasn't surprised.

When they left, the mayor gazed after them with a smile. A little confused, Cory looked at Alec, but his mother probably wasn't a surprise to him. Cory hadn't expected her to be so casual and motherly or so welcoming. Instead of the questioning he expected, Cory had gotten a warm hug. He was glad that someone like that had taken Teddy into her home.

Having a mother like that probably explained why Alec was so easygoing. Cory observed him, but he wasn't noticing his character at the moment. Cory's eyes were traveling down Alec's strong arms to his

long fingers. Those fingers must know their way around a man's body, in and out. Cory let his eyes wander down Alec's legs in jeans as he took long strides leading them to the edge of town and beyond. Snapping out of his admiring trance, Cory realized that he didn't know where they were headed.

"I thought you were going to show me the town," Cory said seeing that they were leaving town but going in the opposite direction from the mayor's house. They walked next to fenced in fields and then turned into the woods.

"The town can wait. I'm going to show you a special spot," Alec said.

Teddy seemed to be happy that they were going on an adventure. He was more lively here than he had been in town. There, his head had been lowered whenever people were around. Cory didn't really blame him. People did stare. They showed friendly interest in Teddy as well as Cory, the newcomer. Even if it was friendly, Cory was a little uncomfortable with the attention so it was no wonder Teddy was too. Now Teddy held his head up and looked all around. In particular he tried to catch sight of birds they could hear twittering in the trees.

As the wood became its thickest, Teddy stopped looking all around and only stared ahead. He seemed excited. Now Cory could hear faint sounds of water rushing. In that direction, Cory glimpsed some big rocks through the trees. With Alec leading the way down a vague path, they came out from among the trees to a stone ledge that came up to their shoulders. Looking up and down, Cory saw that they were at its lowest point. Further on in both directions, it towered above their heads. Alec pulled himself up onto the ledge easily. Teddy looked up at him worriedly.

"Cory will hand you up to me," Alec told him. "When we came here before, I improvised a harness to get Teddy up here."

Teddy turned to Cory shyly. Cory picked him up, surprised at how light he was. Holding him, he felt like his heart would burst. For now, he focused on handing him up to Alec safely. Once Alec had him up on the ledge, Teddy looked down at Cory worriedly, like he was wondering who would help him up. Determined not to embarrass himself in front of his little brother, Cory took a deep breath. Hoisting himself up the same way Alec did, he only managed to clear the edge when Alec gave him a hand at the last minute.

"Not a perfect score," Cory said as he stood up, but Teddy looked pleased that they all made it up there. From his perspective, it probably looked impossibly high.

Cory looked around and just took a moment to absorb what he was looking at. The stone ledge they were standing on was part of a group of large boulders that encircled a pool of water. Two outcroppings of rock came together enclosing the place. The ledge was part of one of

them. The other huge rock had an opening at its base. The low cave was where the water was coming from. It flowed out and filled the stone pool. On the other side, the rocks parted and a patch of ground and trees could be seen. Beyond it, Cory could see a thick forest.

"You are looking at geology in action," Alec announced.

From the edge, Cory looked down into the water. It flowed smoothly then swirled when it hit the other end of the stone basin. Alec continued with his explanation.

"An underground river surfaces here then it goes back underground. It resurfaces again miles away, but this spot is its masterpiece. The softer stone got eroded leaving this space. The water is pretty cold though. Even when it's scorching hot, this spot will freeze your nuts off."

"Shouldn't you censor yourself?" Cory said, nodding toward Teddy.

"I am censoring myself," Alec told him. He was completely serious.

For some reason Teddy was looking up at Alec impatiently.

"I'm getting to that," Alec told him then he turned into a tour guide again. "This place is called Palmer's Grotto, though it's not technically a grotto. During the colonial days, a crazy guy named Palmer used to have a cabin over there." Alec pointed across the water to the small clearing backed by trees.

Cory looked up the rock face that towered above. Teddy followed his gaze.

"Palmer claimed that this place belonged to him because he saw it in a vision before he ever laid eyes on it. He always had his gun ready and threatened anyone who came here. There's a painting of this place in the Town Hall. It shows Palmer in front of his cabin with a musket in his hands, ready to defend his grotto. My dad painted it," Alec said with a smile.

"Did he paint the mayor's portrait too?" Cory asked.

"No. She wasn't the mayor until after he died."

Teddy now looked up at Alec sadly, and Alec ruffled his hair and gave him a smile.

"Did you ever swim here?" Cory asked.

"Sure, but only when my brother dared me. The cold water and the current don't make for a fun swim. Mostly kids come here just to hang out. You can see some graffiti over there. Sometimes you find empties. The sheriff usually stops by to chase them away." Suddenly Alec leaned in and whispered in Cory's ear, "It's terrible for having sex. This rock is hard as a rock."

Cory felt a tingle run all through him and he glared at Alec. Why the hell was he doing this to him?

"Censoring myself," Alec explained.

Cory decided to ignore him and watch Teddy. He didn't like seeing

Teddy standing even two feet away from the edge of the water. He had his arm out ready to catch him. Alec smiled at him for that. Cory shrugged. It was his prerogative as the big brother.

All three of them sat down on the edge of the rock and let their legs dangle over the water. Cory noticed how little Teddy was as he sat between them. He wanted to put his arm around him, but it seemed too soon. For now, he was happy just to be sitting next to him.

As they walked back toward town, Alec said he wanted to get the car and get gas.

"You two walk up Main Street, and I'll pick you up," he told Cory and Teddy. "Don't get lost now."

Teddy looked up at Cory uncertainly, but not like he was worried. As they walked, they passed a small hair salon where they could hear some women laughing. A few, who sat under hair dryers near the window, waved at Teddy. Teddy didn't wave back but Cory did. He wasn't usually so friendly, but he felt like he should be on Teddy's behalf.

Next was a tiny store with snacks near the register. The store sold magazines and newspapers, and a few books. Cory decided to buy a snack for Teddy if he could figure out what he would like. Cory showed different snacks to Teddy. He looked for any sign that would tell him what he liked. His expression changed when he offered him a pack of bubble gum.

"So you're a bubble gum man. I'm a Red Hots man. I like candy that bites back," Cory told him.

Teddy got a funny look on his face hearing that. They spotted Alec's car just then and Cory hurried to pay. As they crossed the street, Cory unconsciously took Teddy's hand. He did it out of instinct, but now he never wanted to let go of that little hand.

Chapter 3

Once they got to the house, Teddy ran straight to the bathroom. Alec went to his room so Cory took the opportunity to wander through the house. There was nothing formal or fussy about the place. Every room was a little messy and disorganized, and that made Cory feel more comfortable about staying there, less like he was intruding. The house was old. Once it had probably been a farmhouse. It must have seen a lot of history, and many lives had been lived in it. The place seemed permanent because of that, like its history had rooted it to the ground.

Some of the furniture reflected its age, but overall the house was furnished carelessly with old, rustic furniture and some newer stuff. The couch and chairs were covered in new, floral fabrics that hurt the eye a little bit. Other than the few new pieces, most of the furniture had obviously seen decades of use. Things had been scratched, broken, repaired and still stood there as proof that not everything is disposable. Cory looked at some of the old pieces more closely, wondering what made them worth fixing and keeping forever. Eventually his wandering through the house took him to the back porch. The sight of it made him smile. That's where Cory's little brother was sitting when he first laid eyes on him. It was strange to think that way about something that happened only earlier that day. It seemed like much longer. This was the most important day of his life, and it wasn't even over yet.

As he stood on the back porch, Cory looked over the drawings of trees Teddy was working on. Then Cory raised his eyes to the view beyond. When he was out here before, he had been so consumed with meeting Teddy that he hadn't noticed much about the land behind the house. From the back porch, Cory could see a field defined by a rough semicircle of trees that thickened into a forest further on. To the east, a hill rose up dark with pine trees that only left the very top bare and rocky.

While he was looking around, Cory didn't notice Alec and Teddy sneaking up on him.

"Aha!" Alec yelled. "Told you he wasn't alert," he said to Teddy.

"You guys got me," Cory said, smiling at Teddy, who looked shy but happy that they surprised him.

Coming to stand next to Cory, Alec stared into the distance. Teddy looked out there too though with a more questioning look, as if he was wondering what was so interesting. Cory loved all the funny

expressions on his face, but he still couldn't wait to hear his voice.

Remembering what this place was called, Cory turned to Alec.

"The old man who gave me directions called this place Snowfield," Cory said to him.

"That's because of the flowers. In early spring the field is covered with white flowers that look like snow. That's how this area and the house got that name," Alec told him.

Teddy looked at the field intently. There were different wild flowers out there but not many white ones.

"You guys missed them," Alec told him. "You can see them next year."

Cory thought that was the wrong thing to say since Teddy probably wouldn't be living here then. Alec showed no awareness that he had said anything he shouldn't have. As all three of them took in the view, Cory decided not to worry about that yet. They were here now, Cory and his little brother and an attractive, arrogant guy who had to have a good heart because he opened his home to them. The sight ahead was an expanse of lighter green that darkened under the shade of the trees, which thickened into a forest further on. It must be something to have that outside your back door and to wake up to sights and sounds of nature every morning.

"It must be nice to live here," Cory said.

"It can be. Especially for kids," Alec said. "When we were kids, my brother and I ran wild all over the countryside. I know all the best ambush spots and places to hide, and the best places to break a few bones." Alec pointed at a big tree to the far right. "My brother jumped on me from that tree when we were six and eight years old. I broke my little finger. He broke his big toe. Mom did so much yelling that day. She told the sheriff to arrest us."

Teddy looked a little scared hearing this.

"We didn't get arrested," Alec assured him and touched the top of his head. "That was before Mom was the mayor, or we would have been in big trouble. And Hutchins wasn't the sheriff then. He's too high strung. He would have never survived our childhood. It was Sheriff Miller. He was fat and moved really slow. He only sighed when Mom would demand he put us in handcuffs and throw us in jail."

Teddy still looked worried.

"Oh, we wanted to be put in jail," Alec told him. "We played bank robbers and car thieves all the time. Mom wouldn't buy us Grand Theft Auto. We were dying to be put behind bars, but Miller would never do it."

"So you had fun growing up around here," Cory said.

"Until a certain age." He looked at Cory significantly. "When I needed a different kind of fun, this place didn't have much to offer."

"He means grown up fun," Cory said to Teddy, who was listening closely but not understanding Alec.

"Want to go for a walk? There's a trail right up to the hill. Or are you too tired?" Alec asked Cory.

Teddy looked eager to go.

"I think we better," Cory said. Even if he didn't want to go, Cory would have said yes just so he wouldn't disappoint Teddy.

*

Alec wished he had thought about how tired Cory must be before he suggested they do more walking. After he made the offer, he saw Cory look at Teddy for the final decision. Those two weren't going to be the kind of brothers he and Ian had been. Alec and his brother had been both teammates and rivals, pushing each other to do crazy things and drive their mother up the wall. The path to the hill was their frequent battleground. The trail curved among trees and shrubs giving them plenty of chances for surprise attacks. Now it was just a place to stroll. The path went right to the bottom of the hill and widened into a sort of rest area with two picnic tables and a garbage bin.

While Teddy's eyes went right to the top of the hill, Cory looked down the narrow dirt road that led there from the other direction.

"It goes into town," Alec told him. He then went up to the sign that said Pine Hill and gave the altitude. He got Teddy's attention then pointed to each letter. Alec had read it to him before. Now Teddy mouthed the words silently then the numbers. Looking up at Alec, he seemed to be asking him if he got it right. Alec read it aloud and left it up to Teddy to decide. Teddy nodded. Cory beamed at him like he had been doing all day. It was as if Cory's whole life had been focused on meeting his little brother. Alec couldn't even imagine what it must be like to find your only family in a little boy.

A reproachful and expectant look from Teddy reminded Alec that he should be playing the tour guide again.

"The town got its name from that." Alec pointed to the top of the pine covered hill. "If you go to the very top, on a clear day, you can see the ocean. Teddy is dying to go up there, but it's a hard climb. My brother and I went up when I was twelve and he was fourteen, I nearly broke my neck. Our father had just died. He promised he would take us up when we were old enough. Climbing to the top is kind of a rite of passage around here."

Alec remembered stubbornly following his brother even though Ian kept telling him to turn back. If they couldn't go with their father, at least they would go together. There was nothing Ian could do to stop him.

Afterward, the two of them tried to sneak back home without letting Mom know where they had been. But seeing the state they were in, she must have known. Their clothes were torn and their fingers were scratched raw from climbing. That was the only time he and his brother did something crazy and Mom didn't yell at them. She just said, "Go get cleaned up." And that was it. They kept waiting, but she didn't scold them like they thought she would. Alec suspected that she understood why they had to do it. Their father's death had been so recent. She must have been in so much pain, but she hardly ever let them see it. She was all bluster and noise with a big heart underneath. That's why, as soon as she laid eyes on Teddy, she decided not to let him be taken away.

"Someone will come for him," she said.

Alec didn't believe it then, but here he was – a quiet, serious big brother for Teddy, and a temptation for Alec.

Alec led the way back home. They circled the house and approached it from the other side. As Cory looked over the fence into the vegetable garden, Alec opened the gate so Teddy could look too. It was in a sorry state, but the tomatoes and green beans thrived anyway. The zucchini were the real problem. They just wouldn't die. Alec didn't hate them as much as he did when he was a kid, but he wasn't a fan either.

"Who takes care of it?" Cory asked.

"Does it look like anyone takes care of it?" Alec said. "My policy on the garden is if it doesn't bother me, I won't bother it. It does fine with minimal interference. My mom isn't much of a cook anyway."

"You mentioned that," Cory said with a wry look.

"I have to," Alec said, ready to justify himself. "I don't want the power to go to her head. My dad would pick the vegetables, and she would look at them like they would bite her. 'What am I supposed to do with these?' The only thing she knew how to handle were the tomatoes. She made enough pasta sauce to last us months. We always have a ton of it in the freezer. My dad would use the other vegetables and make a huge pot of soup. I do the same thing sometimes."

Cory crouched down for a better look. He even pulled some weeds while he was down there.

"If you know what to do with them, they're all yours. Other than the soup, all I know how to do is throw them in a salad or in a blender. Teddy needs the nutrition." Alec looked down just in time to see Teddy grimacing. He had already learned that nutrition was a dirty word.

"Does that mean you want me to cook?" Cory asked like he wanted to know what his duties were around the house.

"If you know how, go for it," Alec told him. He had a feeling that Cory was the kind of guy who liked to make himself useful. "We're a soup and sandwich kind of family. Anything you can add to the menu would be welcome."

"I'll see what I can do," Cory said and looked at Teddy. From that, Alec could guess that he would be cooking with Teddy in mind.

Chapter 4

When they went back into the house, Teddy ran to the back porch and sat down at his table like there was something he urgently had to draw. Cory resisted the urge to go and look over his shoulder. That would probably unnerve the little guy. Though he wanted to spend every second with Teddy, Cory knew he shouldn't smother him, especially since he hadn't even told him who he was.

As Teddy was busy drawing, Cory went and found Alec in the kitchen and took the opportunity to ask him some things. First he pushed down the overwhelming, heart-pounding desire to jump him. Cory hoped he would get used to Alec soon and stop salivating every time he saw him.

"I wanted to ask, who gave Teddy that name?" Cory said. He already thought of him as Teddy. He had to remind himself that that wasn't his name, and that one day, hopefully soon, he would tell them his real name.

"I did," Alec said with a smile. "First I asked Mom how it was done. She said, 'How does anyone come up with a name for a child? When you were born, I just looked at you, and a voice in my heart told me your name was Alec.' So I followed her advice. When I looked at your little brother, the name Teddy popped into my head. I told Teddy it was just temporary in case he didn't like it." Alec frowned. "In those first days, I couldn't tell how he felt about things. He wasn't very expressive."

"Did he cry much?" Cory asked.

"Not at all. I told him it was OK to, but he never did. Not even at the hospital when they took his blood, and he got shots. He flinched, squeezed his eyes shut, but he didn't cry."

Cory bit his lip worriedly. He hated to think of all the sadness trapped inside such a little kid.

"He's a tough little guy," Alec said, seeing the concern it caused him. "He has shown plenty of emotions since then."

Cory had seen that for himself, but he wanted Teddy to feel comfortable showing every emotion, and eventually speaking. There was so much Cory didn't know. It worried him. He didn't want to make any mistakes where Teddy was concerned. Most of all, he was afraid that something might separate him from the little brother he only just met.

"Do you think I could ask the sheriff about the investigation?" Cory asked. He already knew some of it, but he wanted to know more. Not sure about how things worked in Seaview Pines, he didn't want to step

on any toes, especially the sheriff's.

"I can tell you about it too," Alec offered. "Mom told me everything the sheriff and the state police found out."

The two of them sat down at the kitchen table, and Alec talked.

"No one reported seeing Teddy until Bonnie Carlton spotted him by the side of Bailers Road. No one saw him in any car that stopped anywhere within miles of here. The sheriff got the description of every car and every person that was seen anywhere in the area. Only one thing stands out. At a gas station by the off ramp from the interstate, someone remembered seeing a woman with a rose tattoo on her wrist. That only seemed significant once they connected Teddy and you."

"You know about that," Cory said, surprised.

"Only that a woman with a rose tattoo was suspected of abandoning you sixteen years ago. Teddy wasn't seen with her though. And otherwise, her description is very sketchy. A skinny woman, maybe in her forties with curly, blond hair. No one remembered her face or which car she got into."

Cory was thoughtful for a while.

"I was three when I was abandoned. I kind of remember that tattoo but not much else," he said after his long silence. "I found out some things once I turned eighteen, but it wasn't much. The apartment where I was found was rented to some guy who was using a fake name. He couldn't be traced. A bunch of different people crashed there, always coming and going. The neighbors said it was always noisy then it got quiet. After a while, a neighbor heard me crying and crying. They called social services. The neighbors said that I was seen with a woman who called herself Charlene and had a rose tattoo on her wrist. Their best guess was that she might be my mother."

Alec took a deep breath though Cory was the one who felt spent after telling him the few, painful things that he knew.

"Sure makes me appreciate that loud-mouthed politician I have to put up with," Alec said with a grin.

"Your mom is great," Cory said. "I'm glad she took such an interest in Teddy. And that you did too." He was so grateful to them for giving Teddy a home, even if it was a temporary one.

"Mom likes to stick her nose in. She didn't want Teddy shuffled back and forth. Mom was hoping a relative would turn up to claim Teddy. I was skeptical, but here you are," Alec said. He then turned more serious. "I just wish I had more answers for you. Once Teddy starts talking, we'll know more."

Cory was sure that Teddy would start speaking soon, but he wasn't waiting for him to be a source of information.

"I was younger than Teddy when I was left. That part of my life is a blank to me," Cory said. He almost wished it was that way for Teddy

so he wouldn't have to remember the pain of being abandoned. "I'm hoping one of these days Teddy will be able to tell me about himself. But I'm not here to get answers from him about who I am and who left me. I'm here to be his family. I want him to know that family means something. That it's not just a meaningless word like it was for me."

"That won't be hard. All you have to do is stick around forever," Alec said.

That's exactly what Cory planned to do.

"I'm sticking to that kid like glue," Cory vowed. "I want him to feel safe and to lose that hesitant look in his eyes."

"He was only a little hesitant at first. Now he's curious about you," Alec said with a smile.

"I'll be telling him who I am soon. I just didn't want to overwhelm him. I thought it would be easier to hear after we spent a little time together."

"He'll be happy to hear it," Alec assured him.

"I hope so."

Cory went to look in on Teddy then to unpack his things in that small room. That didn't take long, and then Cory was back to wandering through the house. While looking around earlier, Cory had stayed out of the den. He had the impression that it was Alec's private space. Now he stood in the doorway, thinking that since the door was open he could take a look.

What compelled him to go inside was the canvas with a male figure stretching upward as if holding up the dark blue sky. The painting looked unfinished, and Cory was sure that Alec was the artist. Cory inched toward it, but the painting revealed nothing close up. The body was indistinct and the features lacked detail. Seeing other paintings with unrecognizable men, alone and in groups, he wasn't sure if that first one was finished or not. He counted about a dozen canvases leaning against walls and the desk. Two were set up on chairs. There was an easel by the bay window, and there were paints and brushes on a small table next to it.

The paintings weren't bad, not that Cory was any sort of judge. They always featured men but not depicted realistically, more like impressions of bodies almost as if the artists eye couldn't quite focus on any of them. One showed a crowd of men dancing naked. Cory had the urge to tuck it behind some others for Teddy's sake, but he must have already seen it. And it wasn't like that painting or any of the others were obscene. Most of the details were up to Cory's imagination, which was in overdrive. He wondered where Alec might have come across a scene like that. Maybe that was the intention, to stimulate the mind into asking questions and making up its own story.

All the questions Cory wanted to ask were about Alec and his life.

Magnetic, forceful and confident, these paintings were Alec. With their strong lines and a sense of energy and power, they were as if Alec transferred a part of himself to canvas. At the same time, by making them enigmatic and seemingly incomplete, he was leaving some part of himself out, holding back.

Taking his eyes from what interested him most in the room, Cory noticed that the furniture in the den was old but more stately, less rustic than in the rest of the house. He could see that it served as an office not just an art studio. The laptop was on the seat of a leather armchair, and the bench under the big bay window was covered in papers as was the desk. A filing cabinet was stacked with binders. The shelves were crammed with old books. The ones that didn't fit upright were jammed in sideways on top of the others.

Above the mess and the paintings of men, a whole other world existed. Every wall was covered with paintings, but those on the walls were completely different from the ones that drew Cory into the room. These paintings were realistic but a little clumsy. They showed skill and attention to detail but not expertise. Judging by their clarity and innocent vision, Cory thought that maybe an older kid had painted them. Most of them were paintings of trees and of Pine Hill though a few other landscapes were mixed in. They seemed familiar. At first he thought it was because they showed sights he had just seen. Then Cory realized that Teddy's drawings were based on these paintings.

Cory had his eyes glued to the paintings until Alec came in. With a scowl, he pointed at Cory's arm. When he looked, Cory found a smudge of dark blue paint there.

"That one was still wet," Alec said, pointing at the painting that was propped up on the chair. It was the first one Cory had noticed and the blue was from the sky.

"I'm sorry," Cory said.

"It looks OK," Alec told him after he examined the painting closely.

"Did you have to hide these from social services?" Cory asked since they must have visited the place. The paintings weren't explicit, but there was a high level of sexuality and exposed skin on display.

Alec laughed maybe at Cory's seeming prudishness.

"Actually, I did. I put them in the secret cellar. It was dug to hide people and provisions during the Civil War, but it still comes in handy," Alec said.

"What if they make a surprise visit?" Cory asked.

"Out here? No way. Mom would get wind of it," Alec said.

Cory still pictured a social worker taking notes as he or she examined the paintings disapprovingly.

"Don't worry so much. Mom really does have things handled," Alec

told him to try and calm his fears.

"I just don't want to see Teddy dragged away from here after everything he's been through."

"I wouldn't risk that. You worry too much," Alec told him.

"I can't help it. I grew up at the mercy of the system." He had spent his childhood powerless against the arbitrary judgments of bureaucrats. Now he feared for Teddy.

"Mom is the system. Have some faith," Alec said to him.

Cory took a deep breath, knowing he had no choice but to let the matter drop. He moved on to finding out more about Alec.

"So you live here with your mother?" Cory asked.

"Not permanently," Alec said like Cory was making an accusation. "I'm just here till I get my shit together. Mom mostly lives at her office. It was pretty lonely until Teddy got here. My only company was a stray cat that visits us occasionally."

"What do you do?"

"Less than the cat. I do a little painting," Alec said with a shrug.

"Oh, do you?" Cory couldn't help saying since that had been the source of his worry.

"I do," Alec said archly. "And I like to spread out my canvases to dry without worrying that someone is going to brush up against them."

"I'm sorry. I'll be more careful," Cory promised.

"No harm done. But Teddy didn't do that even once."

"He's small," Cory said. "So do you paint for a living?"

"No. I'm a graphic designer. I've been doing it from here a little, just some contract jobs. You might have seen my work on boxes of whole wheat crackers."

"Impressive," Cory said then he noticed Alec leaning in and staring at him very closely. "Hey," Cory said and drew back a little so he could breathe.

"I was just checking the color of your eyes in this light. They're interesting," Alec said, still peering at Cory too intently for his liking.

"Don't tell me you want to paint me," Cory said while he backed himself against the armchair.

"Are you offering?" Alec asked. He didn't seem to mind seeing Cory trapped.

Cory stepped sideways to give himself more room.

"Definitely not," Cory told him. He was already picturing himself posing naked for him with a nonstop hard-on. Before some part of that became reality, Cory decided to change the subjects. "Did you paint these too?" Cory asked, pointing at the paintings on the walls.

"When I was a kid, I did those for my dad before he died. After he got sick, I painted whatever he wanted. He mostly wanted nature paintings like those. The paintings of Pine Hill were his favorites."

Alec was more serious now as he stared at the paintings. They were lit by the coppery light of early evening. He didn't seem to be seeing them though.

"That was nice of you." Cory looked at the paintings again, this time with the knowledge of who painted them and the reason. He imagined Alec painting for his dying father, wanting to give him something beautiful to look at. They were expressions of a child's love for his father. They made Cory want to reach out and touch them, like he could touch Alec's breaking heart painted into every brush stroke.

"It was the least I could do," Alec said with a sad smile. "With a patience of a saint, he taught me how to paint. He never asked for much. He was a quiet, unassuming guy. Mom more than made up for it." Alec's smile brightened at the mention of his mother.

"That's how she got to be the mayor," Cory guessed.

"One day, out of the blue, she announced she was going to put the name Benchley to some use. Benchleys used to run this place, mayors, councilmen, state senators, but not since the 1950's. Mom decided to continue the tradition. She lost her first election, but she won all of the others. She ran for mayor after our dad died. I think she needed to keep busy."

Cory wondered how she managed to win a small town election with an openly gay son. He didn't feel comfortable asking about that.

"Do you sell your paintings?" Cory asked.

"Some of them. But I can't make a living at it."

"They are in here," Alec's mom said as she came in with Teddy. "You're not trying to entice Cory to pose for you, are you? He's a good boy."

Alec looked over at Cory as if he disagreed. Teddy ignored them and went over to stare at the new painting, the one Cory had brushed up against. He looked from the painting to Alec as if he was asking, "What's this supposed to be?"

"He isn't a fan," Alec said.

"You like those up there, right?" Cory said to Teddy.

Looking up at the paintings on the walls with complete approval, Teddy gave an almost imperceptible nod.

"Teddy has impeccable taste," the mayor said. She looked at those paintings with a hint of sadness but also pride. Then she turned to Alec. "Have you been dragging this poor, tired boy all over the countryside?" she asked him as she put an arm around Cory's shoulders.

"Teddy and I showed him all the notable sights around here," Alec said to his mother.

"Did you show him where you almost broke your neck? Did you show him where you almost drowned and where your brother almost

cracked his head open and..."

"Yes, all those," Alec said to stop her.

Putting her other arm around Teddy, she said, "After those two, it's so nice to have two good boys around this place."

"Is this bad boy making you dinner?" Alec asked her.

"No. I have a dinner meeting at the Moynahans'. Millie wants to talk me into expanding the Founder's Festival to three days."

"Three days of everyone being full of fried food and drunk off their ass. Why not?" Alec said with a shrug.

"Because of the expenses that a third day won't make up in revenues, that's why," his mom told him.

"So you have your mind made up, but you'll still let the Moynahans wine you and dine you?" Alec asked.

"That's right," she said cheerfully.

"That's politics for you," Alec lamented.

"And I love every minute of it." His mom flashed them a big smile and blew them a kiss as she went to her bedroom to get ready.

The mayor was gone as soon as she changed into a dress. Cory didn't even get a chance to let her know that he was planning to tell Teddy he was his brother. He had spent all day in anticipation of that moment. After he watched Teddy drawing under the porch light, too absorbed to notice him, Cory decided it was time. He just couldn't wait any more.

Chapter 5

Cory found Alec rummaging through the kitchen cupboards and grumbling.

"I want to tell Teddy I'm his brother. I want to do it now," Cory told him. "I'd like you to be there. He knows you already, and he just met me."

"OK," Alec agreed, stopping what he was doing. "Thanks for letting me be a part of the big moment." He took a deep breath.

Cory could tell that he was a little nervous too so he smiled at him.

After calling Teddy into the living room, Alec took an armchair across from him. Cory sat next to Teddy on the sofa.

"You know I came here to see you, right?" Cory said. "I wanted to tell you why. A little while ago, this lady I know called me and told me about you. And they did some tests, and they found out that you are my brother."

Teddy looked perplexed.

"You know that yellow taxi, the little car that you have. It used to be mine." As soon as Cory said that, Teddy ran off to his room.

Cory was alarmed, but Teddy came right back with the yellow taxi in his hand and offered it to Cory. He was holding it out on the palm of his hand. Cory realized he was returning it to him.

"No. That was a long time ago. It's yours now. You can keep it," Cory told him, smiling with relief that it wasn't anything more serious that sent him running off.

Teddy looked down at the car then held it in both hands. He had treasured it not knowing that one day it would bring his big brother to him.

"That car is how they found me," Cory explained. "I was very happy that they did. You're my little brother."

Teddy still looked uncertain, but he also looked at Cory in a new way. He was trying to figure out what having a brother meant.

Alec now spoke up for the first time.

"What do you say we celebrate the big news and order pizza?" he asked Teddy, whose eyes brightened. "OK. Let's find out what kinds of toppings your big brother likes."

They pored over the menu together then Alec called it in. When Teddy went to the front window to wait for the delivery, Alec and Cory talked.

"Pizza is a bigger hit than I am," Cory said.

"And it's not even good pizza," Alec told him. "It's from Thompson's.

It's one of the worst pizzas I've ever had. As a kid, I used to love it. Just like Teddy, I didn't know there was such a thing as a bad pizza. I used to fight my brother for the last slice."

When the car with the pizza arrived, Alec handed Teddy the money.

"Pizza is on you," he told him.

A teenaged girl with big, pink headphones on her head brought the pizza.

"That's Trish Thompson. She delivers for her granddad. Don't expect her to say hi, or smile, or acknowledge your existence in any way," Alec said as the girl freed the pizza from the bag.

Teddy paid her and she handed Alec the pizza. As Alec carried the pizza box into the kitchen, Teddy didn't take his eyes off it. Once they each had a plate with a slice of pizza, Alec asked, "What's the procedure?"

Teddy touched his slice of pizza with his finger then nodded.

"That's right. Touch it then bite it. That's so you don't burn the roof of your mouth like you did that first time," Alec reminded him.

Teddy looked grave as he agreed with another nod.

After tasting it, Cory had to admit that Alec was right about the pizza. It wasn't good at all. But it was the first pizza he and Teddy were sharing as brothers so it was perfect.

After dinner, Alec announced it was nutrition time. He made a fruit salad with bananas, apples, and grapes then he ruined it by mixing in strawberry yogurt. Teddy ate this so called dessert eagerly. Alec served himself fruit without the yogurt, but Cory got the version with yogurt. He forced himself to eat every bite while wondering if Alec was a sadist.

"OK, Teddy, it's time to clear the table outside," Alec told him.

It was dark out. Cory could see insects buzzing around the porch light. Teddy went out to the back porch and scooped up the crayons and stuffed them back into the box. A lot of them were broken and didn't fit properly any more. He then gathered the papers into a messy stack, which he held against his chest. Seeing Cory watching him, he stopped and stared at him.

"Put those away. I want to take a picture of you guys," Alec said.

Teddy went to his room and Cory waited. When Teddy came back, Alec told them to stand by the fireplace. Cory put his arm around Teddy's shoulders. He didn't need anyone to tell him to smile. He couldn't stop himself from grinning like a fool.

After taking the picture and showing it to them on his phone, Alec went and printed up three copies. He gave them each one and set the third one on the mantle next to the Benchleys' family pictures. Alec had put the word brothers at the bottom of the picture.

"You know what it says?" Alec asked Teddy.

Teddy mouthed a B but wasn't sure about the rest. Alec read it slowly while pointing at each letter. Teddy read it silently several times, and Cory felt like he might cry.

As Teddy was getting ready for bed, Cory went up to Alec.

"Thanks for doing that."

"I almost didn't think of it. I should have started snapping pictures the second you told him. No, the second you arrived," Alec said.

"This one is great. Thank you. It's my first family picture."

"You'll have many more," Alec predicted.

At bedtime, Teddy got ready by himself as soon as Alec told him it was time. There was only one exception. Teddy waited for Alec to supervise him as he brushed his teeth. After Teddy went to his room, Alec and Cory lingered in the hallway.

"When he got here, he didn't know how to brush his teeth," Alec told him.

Cory tried to imagine what kind of life Teddy had lived. He was lost in thought when Alec nudged him. Together they went to Teddy's room.

When Alec and Cory stepped in, Teddy was clearing the drawings from the other bed. He was making room for them to sit.

"What do we do now?" Cory asked as he sat next to Alec on the bed across from Teddy's.

"Tell him a story," Alec said.

Put on the spot like that, Cory at first drew a blank. Then he decided to keep it simple.

"When I got into town, I didn't know which way to go. That's when I met a man who keeps his teeth in his pocket."

With the covers pulled up to his chin, Teddy nodded.

"Everyone knows about Mr. Hummel and his teeth. That's not a story," Alec said.

Cory glared at him for being such a harsh critic over a bedtime story, his first one too.

"I'm getting to the story. Mr. Hummel's teeth reminded me of when I lived with this family, the Gordons. After a little while their grandmother moved in with them. She kept her teeth in a glass of water by the bed. These guys also had a fish tank. I wasn't allowed to feed the fish, but Mr. Gordon always called me over to watch when he was feeding them. I would watch the fish chase around after the little flakes. But one night, I got worried about the grandmother's teeth. I thought they might be hungry too so I gave them some fish food."

Both Alec and Teddy looked at him like he was crazy.

"I was very little," Cory said to try to defend himself.

Alec shook his head and then Teddy shook his head too.

"So I shouldn't tell you how the first time I saw old Mrs. Gordon take out her teeth, I cried and hid under the bed?" Cory said.

Teddy let out a tiny laugh then he covered his head with the sheet.

"Are you laughing under there?" Alec accused him.

"Maybe he's scared like I was," Cory said.

Teddy poked his head out to prove he wasn't scared.

"You're a brave boy," Cory told him.

Teddy liked hearing that then he looked up at the ceiling. Following his gaze, Cory saw that the night sky was painted up there.

"My dad did that. This used to be my and my brother's room. Check this out," Alec went over to the light switch and turned off the light. The stars and the moon started to glow.

Teddy watched them for a while then his eyes started to close. He kept opening them, but eventually sleep won the battle. Cory stayed a little longer, watching him to make sure he would stay asleep.

As he and Alec left, Cory asked, "So where is your brother now?"

"He's in L.A. He builds pools."

"Then he's in the right place."

Alec showed him a picture hanging on the hallway wall. Alec's brother was looking very muscular and tanned in a t-shirt and shorts, standing next to an impressive pool.

"He's a hunk," Cory said.

"Hey. Aim some of that admiration my way," Alec demanded.

Cory refused to even look at him. The last thing he needed was to admire Alec any more than he already did.

With nothing better to do, Cory and Alec were lounging around in the living room. Cory felt the buzz of sexual tension being alone with someone who was as blatantly hot as Alec. Alec was sitting low on the couch with his feet up on the coffee table. He showed no signs of feeling anything but relaxed. That just made Cory crazier. Why couldn't he be at least a little bit anxious too? Cory took a deep breath. He couldn't avoid Alec so he better make peace with being horny and being ignored.

It was a cool evening. The back door was open but the screen was closed. Fresh air came through, blown in from the field. Cory could hear birds calling to each other.

"Other than getting to know Teddy, what's your plan?" Alec asked.

"He's my brother. I want to take care of him," Cory said simply.

"That's good. So you want custody."

"Yes. They already have proof that we're brothers."

"They'll be more likely to give you custody if you show them you

are a stable individual with a job and connections to a community," Alec told him.

"I don't have any of that crap." That worried him. Cory had been living with friends while he was looking for another job.

"That just means you need to get started on getting some of that crap," Alec told him. "You have a place to live. That's one down."

"I do?"

"You can live here as long as you need to. You are already the big brother in residence. We have the room, and this way you can spend time with Teddy. It benefits everyone." Alec said it like it was no big deal, but Cory was speechless. He thought he would be able to stay there for a few days at most.

"And the mayor, I mean, your mother?" Cory asked.

"Oh, she loves being called the mayor," Alec told him. "And she wanted to reunite Teddy with his family. It doesn't get any more reunited than living in the same house."

Cory wasn't going to take his word for it. He would wait to hear it from Alec's mother and not get his hopes up until then. Seeing that he hadn't convinced him, Alec texted his mother. He showed Cory what she texted back. "Cory can have your room."

"See," Alec said. "She already likes you better than me."

"Do I have a chance in hell of getting a job around here?" Cory wondered.

"Try it and see. The mayor will give you a hell of a reference. She might even pull some strings," Alec said.

Cory was willing to take any job as long as it meant he could stay with Teddy.

A little later, Alec's mom arrived and welcomed Cory all over again, and she insisted he call her Miriam.

"Go on, move your stuff out," she told her son. "We can't have Teddy's brother staying in that itty-bitty room."

"The room is fine. It's great," Cory told her. It made him smile to see how Alec and his mom teased each other. Neither took the other one seriously, but the whole time they had a fond look in their eyes.

When Miriam found out about Cory telling Teddy he was his brother, she wanted to hear all about it. Cory was worried that she might be unhappy that he did it without telling her first.

"I would never want to stand between you and Teddy," she said. Seeing the picture of the two of them Alec put up on the mantle, she nearly cried. Teddy had really touched her heart. She wanted for him what she had given her children, a home and a family, and Cory did too.

That night, Cory couldn't go to sleep without looking in on Teddy. As he stood in the doorway of Teddy's room, Cory wasn't sure he could go to sleep at all. Too much had happened, and it all centered on that little boy. The light from the hallway illuminated Teddy's peaceful, sleeping face. Even as he looked at him, Cory had to remind himself that this was real. That was his little brother.

Looking at Cory's small hands clutching at the edge of the covers, Cory thought about the yellow cab. He looked around for it and found it on top of a wooden chest. He picked it up like it was sacred and brought it closer to the light coming in from the hallway. It didn't look familiar to him at all. As he held it, he wondered what it meant that the car had been passed on to Teddy. While he tried not to read too much into it, it was too tempting not to. That car was the thing that had linked them.

It chilled Cory to think that one little detail brought him to Teddy. If it wasn't for this toy car, they would never know they were brothers. They would still be apart, alone in the world. Cory didn't remember the yellow cab, but he must have held it in his hand, played with it. The proof was found inside.

Once the police got involved in Teddy's case, everything he had with him was examined – his tattered shoes, every piece of clothing, the dirt under his fingernails. They looked for evidence and tried to trace his belongings. When they looked at the yellow cab that Teddy was holding when he was found, someone noticed that the doors were glued into place. The doors were the kind that opened, but they had broken off and been glued shut. The space where the doors once opened was just big enough for a child's finger. When the police pried open the car doors, they found a fingerprint inside – Cory's. Later, a DNA test confirmed a connection. Teddy and Cory were half-brothers.

Cory remembered sitting speechless when he heard the news that he had family, a little brother who needed him. He had to remind himself to breathe. He wanted to cry and laugh. But as too many emotions threatened to overwhelm him, he felt determination grow inside him and push aside everything else. He and his brother were going to be a family.

Chapter 6

When he woke up early next morning, Cory could hear someone moving around in the hall just outside his room. The lightness of the steps told him it was Teddy. He got up and opened the door. Still in his pajamas, Teddy stood in front of his door holding a drawing. He seemed anxious.

"Good morning. Did you draw something?" Cory asked him.

With a deep frown, Teddy handed him a drawing. Cory gazed at what looked like a chicken with undersized wings. The drawing had Teddy's signature in purple crayon in one corner.

"So you can draw a bird. Can I keep it?" he asked Teddy.

Teddy nodded. He was bright eyed as he looked up at Cory.

"Thank you. I'm going to put it on the wall right over there next to the bed," Cory said and pointed out the spot.

Teddy looked even more pleased now.

"Is Alec up?" Cory asked.

Teddy looked toward his closed bedroom door without saying anything. Cory guessed that he wasn't. He didn't know Alec, but Cory had a feeling he wasn't the type to get up too early.

"Let's get dressed, OK," Cory said to Teddy.

It turned out that Alec's mom was already gone for the day. When Alec got up, they all had breakfast. It was cereal all around. Alec got Teddy's vitamins then for some reason looked long and hard at Cory.

"Maybe Cory should have one. He looks a little undernourished," Alec said with an evil smirk.

After looking at Cory, Teddy handed him a vitamin. Cory scowled at Alec as he chewed it. That didn't stop Cory from showing Teddy's new drawing to Alec. Cory said, "Look, it's a bird." He didn't want Alec to call it a chicken or something.

Alec looked over at Teddy with a smile.

"Did you draw this for your big brother?" Alec asked.

Teddy looked shy then he nodded.

After breakfast, Cory decided they should take a walk into town. That way he could get to know the town and get to know Teddy too.

"Want to take a walk with me? Alec can come too if he wants," Cory offered.

"You guys should go. Teddy knows his way around pretty well. He won't let you get lost," Alec said.

As they left, Teddy looked like he took his duty of not letting Cory

get lost very seriously.

"Bring Cory back safe," Alec yelled after them.

Cory waved to him as he and Teddy turned from the driveway and went up the road. To make Teddy feel more at ease, Cory had included Alec in his invitation. Not that Cory would have minded if he came along. But unlike Teddy, Cory couldn't be completely relaxed around him. He had never spent much time with a guy who was so blatantly good looking that he couldn't help being a little arrogant about it. Cory didn't really blame him for that. He just didn't want to stroke his ego any more than he already had. That wasn't easy. He felt like he was giving himself away with every look that lasted longer than it should and with every averted gaze. The looks Alec gave him didn't help. Cory knew he was just teasing him, but he still got hot when Alec leered at him playfully. Bastard. Alec was like someone who plays with a loaded gun. Didn't he know any better than to flaunt himself and stir up a guy like Cory? It would serve him right if Cory snuck into his room one night.

Cory turned to Teddy, who was walking alongside him, taking big steps.

"Good thing I have you to keep me out of trouble," Cory said. For his sake, he wouldn't do anything to embarrass himself with Alec.

Teddy looked up at him with a serious expression then looked straight ahead. Cory had noticed that he didn't mind taking charge. One of these days Cory might have to remind him that he was the big brother. For now, he was happy to let Teddy play the tiny general.

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When Cory mentioned going into town, Alec had wanted to go with them, but he decided to let the brothers bond. He looked after them with more longing than he expected. Sure, he had gotten used to having Teddy all to himself and being the one he turned to. Now there was also Cory. Alec had woken up with Cory on his mind and jumped out of bed more eagerly than usual, but not any earlier. Watching Cory walk away wasn't what Alec had looked forward to, though the sight of his ass was damn delectable. Alec mentally stripped off his loose fitting jeans and put him in a pair of tight ones. Then he stripped those off too and just feasted his eyes on naked perfection.

Alec groaned, slapped his forehead and scolded his imagination. He told himself to keep it zipped, keep it buttoned and keep a lid on it. Cory wasn't a recreational activity. He was Teddy's only family. But why did Cory have to have those eyes and that slim, fuck-me body. It was not fair. Alec had no practice resisting temptation. When presented with temptation, he just said, "Yes, please." If it weren't for

Teddy, Alec would be luring Cory into his bed. Maybe he would have already done it, and this morning, he would have woken up next to him, tangled in the same sheet. Too bad that wasn't going to happen. Alec cared about Teddy too much to risk his peace of mind. Teddy needed Cory more than Alec needed to get some. That was a new concept for Alec. Usually nothing could beat getting what he wanted. What was happening to him? Alec looked around him in dismay. He was back living in his childhood home and denying himself a sweet fuck. Had he been body-snatched? Alec headed straight to the den and took a brush in his hand. If he painted anything other than naked men, he would know for sure.

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With Teddy setting the pace, they reached the edge of town in no time. Cory was now more familiar with Seaview Pines, and it seemed the people of the town were also more familiar with him. As he and Teddy walked along Main Street, he got fewer curious stares and more casual greetings. When they passed Carla's hair salon, the ladies waved, and a voice from inside called out, "Hey there, Cory and Teddy. Stop by any time!" A blonde woman waved a gloved hand at them.

Noticing Teddy's shaggy hair, Cory stopped and turned to him.

"Do you think you might want to get your hair cut?"

Teddy touched his hair protectively.

"You don't have to, only if you want to."

Teddy looked at Cory's short hair and got a determined look on his face.

"Let's go to Carla's," Cory said and watched Teddy turn decisively like a little soldier.

It turned out that the blonde woman was Carla, and she already knew Cory was Teddy's brother.

"Don't be surprised," she told him. "A hairdresser finds out everything first. So what can I do for you boys?" She took off her hair-color stained gloves.

"If you have time, I think Teddy might want a haircut," Cory said. Teddy nodded once to confirm it.

"I'll make time. I've been dying to get my hands on these golden locks," Carla said as she eyed Teddy's hair.

"Oh, no. Leave it long. It looks so cute," one of the ladies under a hairdryer said.

"It was Teddy's decision," Cory said as he watched Teddy climb into the chair then widen his eyes at his own image in the mirror.

"Do you have any work that needs to be done here, sweeping up or

anything?" Cory asked as Carla got Teddy ready for his haircut.

"Sorry, hon. I do it all myself. But Liza at the All Apparel will take you on for sure," Carla told him with a wink.

Cory heard the other ladies laugh so he was pretty sure she wasn't talking about a real job. The ladies seemed to be making fun of this Liza more than him. In the meantime, Teddy was covered up and wet haired, ready for his haircut. Cory went over to stand next to him.

"How do you want it, hon?" Carla asked Teddy. She showed him some pictures, but Teddy kept looking up at Cory. Finally Carla figured it out. "Like your big brother. Of course. You'll be the spitting image."

Hearing this, Teddy sat straight and put on a face that said, "Go ahead."

When she was done, Teddy's hair was blow-dried and even a little moussed. Cory leaned down next to him so they were framed together in the mirror.

"Pretty good, huh?" Carla said, proud of her work.

"Could you take a picture of us?" Cory asked her, offering his phone.

"Sure will. And one for my wall." Carla took out her own phone and pointed at the wall where pictures of customers were displayed.

Once their pictures were taken, Teddy went over to look at the pictures on the wall. When Cory joined him, he spotted one of Alec and his brother as teenagers. His brother had his arm around Alec, but they didn't have matching haircuts. Alec's was practically a buzz cut. His brother's hair was longer, styled to show off the wave in his hair.

"That's Alec and his brother," Cory said pointing it out to Teddy.

Seeing which picture they were looking at, Carla said, "I'll be sure to put yours right next to that one."

When they went back out on the street, a girl about Cory's age stopped in front of them. She was wearing a men's work shirt over a pink t-shirt and tight jeans and had her mousy brown hair in a pony tail.

"Hey there, Teddy. Long time no see. Almost didn't recognize you with the new haircut. Looking good. Mrs. Slozek always asks about you," she rattled off. "And who's this?"

"I'm Cory, Teddy's brother," Cory introduced himself.

Teddy ducked his head and smiled shyly. She chuckled at his shyness.

"Nice to meet you. That's great. I'm Bonnie Carlton. So how come he was just standing there? Do you know? I'm driving by and I'm like, 'Check out the little hitchhiker.'"

"You're the one who found Teddy," Cory realized. He remembered

Alec mentioning her name.

"Sure. I make deliveries for the Smorgasbord, the grocery store. I was driving from the Pooles to Mrs. Slozek when I spot Teddy like some mini-hitchhiker with all his things by his feet. What a sad sight. He was looking up the road like he was waiting for whoever left him there to come back for him. So I went whoosh!" She acted out turning the wheel sharply. "I told him to hop in, but I wasn't sure what to do at first. I figured I'd take him into town. But I only had Mrs. Slozek to deliver to and her perishables in the back on ice. The woman likes her fish. So I took him along. Mrs. Slozek tried to give him some cookies, but he only looked down at his feet, didn't take them. Then I drove him back to town, took him to the sheriff. And he yelled at me for driving the kid all over instead of calling him right away. He was all 'A crime has been committed!' Probably scared the kid half to death."

"Damn it." Cory didn't like the sound of that.

"He always yells. Sheriff Hutchins is always freaking out about something. The mayor and Alec took charge of Teddy after that. So it was OK."

"Thank you for picking him up," Cory said.

"It was no trouble. He's such a quiet, little guy. I'm a good talker and he's a good listener. He can make deliveries with me any time," she said.

"Oh, do you know if anyone is hiring around here?" Cory asked her.

She grimaced thoughtfully.

"The jobs around here are either temporary or taken. Mrs. James needed someone to take care of her chickens while she visited her sister's, but she's back now. My job delivering is only twice a week, and sometimes they cut me back to once. Damn. I'll ask around for you," she told him and went on her way.

Cory sighed then heard Teddy let out a small sigh of his own.

"Don't worry, I'll find something," Cory told him. "Let's go to that grocery store she mentioned. Do you know where it is?"

Teddy looked up the street.

"OK. You lead the way," Cory said and took his hand. He felt Teddy's hand close around his fingers.

Teddy stopped in front of a place that called itself Smorgasbord Supermarket, but it was really more of a small corner store. Here too, people greeted Teddy and asked him who Cory was. Cory found that he was glad to introduce himself as Teddy's brother. Teddy's eyes brightened at the words though the attention made him look down shyly.

They walked up and down the aisles, and Cory watched for signs of interest from Teddy. It was a given that candy would do the trick, but Cory was surprised when Teddy stopped in front of the yogurt display.

"I guess we should get some?"

Teddy gave a quick nod.

"We'll get every flavor. They don't have that many," Cory decided. But when he reached for the peach, Teddy shook his head. "No peach?"

Teddy shook his head again.

Cory had noticed that he was nodding and shaking his head more now. It was progress, or at least it was communication. If only he could get him to say something. But Cory wasn't going to push him.

At the register, when Cory held the shopping bags full of what they bought, Teddy looked at them intently.

"You want to carry one?" Cory asked and offered him the lightest one.

Even after Cory gave it to him, he still kept looking.

"Did you want something else?" Cory wondered if he had misunderstood him.

Teddy reached out for the handles of another bag. Cory lightened it for him and then showed him how to carry the bags so they wouldn't drag on the ground. On their walk back to the house, Cory offered to take the bags, but Teddy shook his head vehemently. He carried them all the way to the house.

As soon as they walked in, Cory announced to Alec, "Teddy carried the bags all the way here."

Wiping paint off his hands, Alec came out of the den and grinned at them. Teddy looked both shy and proud of himself.

"That's the way to build some serious muscles to go with your new haircut. It looks good," Alec told him as they all went into the kitchen.

"You'll have to show me where things go," Cory told Teddy.

"Your big brother sure needs a lot of help," Alec said. "Good thing he has you."

Teddy looked over at Cory like he was happy to take on the responsibility to help his big brother.

As he was putting things away, Cory had a chance to familiarize himself with where things were kept. The kitchen drawers held everything in a jumble, and the refrigerator now had too much yogurt for his liking. Alec looked over his shoulder at how he was arranging yogurt by flavor and expiration date.

"Not alphabetically?" Alec said, making fun of him.

"Don't you dare trick me into eating it again," Cory whispered to him, remembering last night's so called dessert.

Alec smirked. Cory knew he had done it on purpose.

"I never touch the stuff myself. Mom bought the yogurt for Teddy. It was iffy when he first tried it, but he turned into a big fan so we keep

them in stock," he explained.

Alec offered Teddy a strawberry yogurt, which he actually took and ate. Cory watched him like he was performing a magic trick.

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Alec watched Cory watching Teddy. It seemed like everything the kid did was a treat for his big brother. Alec remembered observing Teddy just as carefully. When he had tried his first spoonful of yogurt Mom bought for him, Teddy made a face. Alec was sure the experiment was a bust, but Teddy kept eating until he was scraping out the last spoonful from the cup.

"It's a hit! Yogurt is a hit!" Mom proclaimed like she had just won the lottery.

Teddy looked up at her wide-eyed then quickly looked down. In those days he was still closed off. He couldn't stay that way for long with Mom fussing over him noisily when she wasn't rushing off to be the mayor.

That left Alec in charge of Teddy. He remembered the fear that gripped him the first time he had to take care of him alone. "Nope, that attitude is not gonna fly," he told himself. There's already a terrified little boy in the picture. That role has been filled. Alec had to be the adult – a role he was familiar with only in passing. If he couldn't muster up some maturity and courage, he was going to fake it.

As he spent time with Teddy, Alec tried not to ask too much of him. He figured the kid needed the same thing he did, some peace and quiet so he could hear himself think. They had plenty of that, too much of it even, but Teddy didn't get bored. It worried Alec that he was so different from a typical child his age. He wanted Teddy to make noise even if he didn't want to speak. He wanted to see Teddy disobey him, throw a tantrum or two, show him he wasn't scared to make trouble, to make him angry and risk punishment. But Teddy was no trouble at all. Except for refusing to speak, he was a model of a well-behaved child.

When Alec talked to the child psychologist about it, she said, "It could be a lot worse considering how he was found. Don't compare him to other children. They didn't grow up the way he must have. He stays out of the way, stays unobtrusive, asks for nothing because that's what he is used to. That's what he learned he had to do. He'll come out of his shell when he feels it's safe."

Alec had seen it happening a little bit even before Cory arrived, but now he was seeing a big difference in just one day. Teddy was showing him expressions he had never seen before. When he joined

them in the kitchen, Alec saw how Teddy looked at Cory with wonder and pride. Silently he was proclaiming that this was his big brother and how happy it made him.

Chapter 7

"You're late for your lesson, young man," Alec said and he pointed at the big clock in the kitchen.

Teddy stared hard at the clock, trying to figure out what it said then he gasped.

"Better go get your books," Alec told him, and Teddy ran off.

"A lesson?" Cory asked.

Alec pointed his thumb out the kitchen window into the yard.

"We have it out there when the weather is nice. I was teaching Teddy how to tell time, letters and numbers so he could catch up and start school in the fall. It doesn't look like he ever went to preschool. He's picking it up fast though. We've already moved on to reading and writing."

"How can you teach him to read if he won't speak?" Cory wondered.

They could hear Teddy's running feet as he came back from his room. Alec shook his head at his eager student.

"You can see for yourself," Alec said to Cory, and went out through the kitchen door. He sat down at the table in the yard to wait for Teddy.

Teddy looked very serious as he carried his books outside to join him. There was a simple wooden table with two benches on either side. That's where Alec conducted his lessons. He smiled watching the way Teddy approached and arranged the books in front of him. He sat next to Alec and waited patiently for him to begin. Cory came over, but he didn't sit with them. He hung back and watched.

Teddy was very attentive as Alec picked out one of the old children's books he and Ian used to read when they were little. He went over some words that were new to Teddy then went over the whole page. Then it was Teddy's turn to try reading it. Teddy pointed at each word and his mouth moved uncertainly. Each time he didn't know a word, he looked at Alec for help. Alec read it for him. At the end of each sentence, Alec read it over and Teddy would nod. Teddy could read only a few words consistently, but he was always improving. It would help if he could sound them out. Alec was sure that one day soon, he would.

When Teddy's lesson was over, he stayed at the table to do his homework. Alec went up to Cory where he was standing. As he approached, Alec took a moment to admire his slim body first then his pretty eyes.

"I want to give him lessons too. You teach him to read and write. I'll teach him math," Cory said.

"Sounds good. We can do it every other day."

"He can have more than one lesson a day," Cory said.

"Are you completely heartless? You want to ruin the kid's summer?" Alec asked him.

"He likes learning," Cory pointed out.

That was true.

"I know. He loves it when I give him homework," Alec said, shaking his head.

Cory had seen that for himself. Alec told Teddy to look over the book five times. Teddy looked like he was offering him ice cream. With Cory teaching him, Teddy was going to be an even happier student.

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For a while, Cory watched as Teddy read the book. Green and boundless, the yard made for an appealing classroom. The grass rustled under the touch of the light wind. Birds sang in the background. Their wings fluttered as they took off from the trees. Finished with his homework, Teddy gathered the children's books to bring back inside. Cory came in with him. As Cory passed his own room, he saw the bird picture Teddy had drawn for him. It was still sitting on his bed. Calling Teddy over, Cory asked him to help put it up on the wall. Teddy brought him the tape.

Back in his room, Cory shifted the bird drawing on the wall until he got a nod from Teddy. After taping it up, they both looked at it with pride. Since he had the tape in hand, Cory offered to put up more of Teddy's pictures in his room. Cory put up the drawings as Teddy handed them to him in some order only he understood. When Cory pointed to one picture and said it was his favorite, Teddy climbed on the bed and took the picture off the wall and handed it to Cory. It was a picture of two trees with a house between them. It looked like the house was hanging in midair between the trees, but somehow it was still perfect.

"Thank you. I'll put it up next to the bird picture." Cory looked at the spot where the picture had been.

Teddy frowned at the gap.

"I guess you'll have to draw a picture to go there," Cory said.

Teddy nodded in agreement. Then he smiled at Cory suddenly. The smile was gone almost as soon as it appeared, but it almost made Cory's heart burst with happiness. He had never known a smile could be worth so much.

Looking at Teddy with his new haircut, Cory remembered the picture Carla took. He gave his phone to Alec so he could print it out.

"Now you have a before and after," Alec said. He put the new picture next to the first brothers picture. The caption this time read Brothers Day 2. He read it for Teddy's benefit.

"We saw a photo of you and your brother at Carla's," Cory said.

"That picture," Alec said, making a face. "Ian practically put me in a choke-hold to make me hold still for it."

"You did look kind of antisocial in it," Cory told him.

"I was gay, and I was stuck here. What do you expect?" Noticing Teddy listening, Alec told him, "Gay means I like guys."

"I like them too," Cory said, taking the opportunity to tell Teddy.

Their coming out made no impression on Teddy. Alec shrugged. As he eyed him, Cory compared this older Alec to the picture of him he had seen at Carla's. He was glad Alec had let his hair grow out. It gave him a slightly wild look. As he thought of the current Alec and his younger self, Cory wondered about his life. He couldn't remember ever wanting to know everything about someone, but that's how he felt as he looked at Alec at that moment. He wanted to know him completely.

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Alec noticed Cory looking at him strangely just as his mom came through the front door. He guessed she was probably home for lunch, but it turned out her real reason was to gush over Teddy's new haircut.

"I heard you got one, and I couldn't wait to see it," she said and petted Teddy's new haircut like it was a cat.

"You heard that Cory went food shopping. That's why you're really here," Alec accused her.

She kissed him on the cheek and ignored his comment. Turning to Cory, she said, "What I heard is that you've been asking about a job."

"I have. Word travels fast, I guess."

"Around here people know what you've done even before you've done it. As for a job, I can give you a job right now," she said to Cory then turned to Alec. "We can reopen the store and see if my idea will fly."

Alec was surprised, but he knew what she meant right away.

"Seriously?" Alec said. He explained for Cory's benefit. "Mom inherited the hardware store from her parents. She made the mistake of letting me work there one summer when I was home from college, and I drove the place into the ground." That was not a good way to spend his summer break, but he didn't want to see the old place going out of business after his grandfather died. Too bad he couldn't keep it going.

"That's not what happened," Mom said, letting him off the hook. "The place was already failing. Unless they just needed a box of nails or some duct tape, everyone was driving to the big stores in Medford and Beacher. I had the idea of switching gears and renting out tools. People could come to us when they need a pressure washer or a chain saw or whatever."

"Seems like a good idea," Cory said.

"See, he's on board," she said, making too much of Cory's words of approval.

"Mom, where is your inventory?" Alec asked since the store was bare. It was one of the empty storefronts the town had too many of.

"The new manager of Clay's Hardware and Rentals will take care of ordering inventory," she said dumping the problem on Cory.

"That's you," Alec told Cory just in case he didn't realize it.

"I hardly know anything about tools," Cory said.

"That's more than this one ever did," Mom said pointing her thumb at Alec.

"It's a job and you need one," Alec said, casting his vote in favor of the idea.

"I'll ask old Mack Utley to help out. He does odd jobs, mostly as a handyman. He'll know what we need and what we need two of," Mom said already looking up his number on her phone.

"Is this really happening?" Cory asked Alec while Mom was busy on the phone.

"Yes. You just got hired. Or steamrolled," Alec confirmed.

Cory still looked doubtful.

"I could definitely use a job, but this seems too easy," Cory told him.

"Easy? You haven't seen the place yet. Let's go have a look after lunch," Alec offered. That would make it more real for him. "Hey, Teddy, want to see the store where Cory is going to be working?" Alec asked him.

Teddy had been trying to follow their conversation but not really getting it. He now looked at Cory like he finally understood and was ready to go right now.

"Lunch first," Alec told him.

Mom sat on the porch with Teddy while Alec and Cory took care of lunch. Cory had found a few ripe tomatoes in the garden and was cutting them up. As Alec threw together the rest of their lunch, he noticed Cory looking his way. Caught staring, Cory turned away to frown at the tomatoes.

"You don't need to be shy. Look all you want, just don't touch," Alec said.

"I will throw this tomato at your head." Cory raised a tomato threateningly.

"No, you won't."

"OK, I won't but only because I'm not a violent person and also I don't like to waste food."

Teddy came in and looked at the two of them. Mom had probably sent him to check on lunch.

"Teddy, do me a favor. Remind Alec what you think of his good looks," Cory said.

Teddy made a face at Alec, and Alec groaned.

"He'll give you a dose of that any time you need it," Cory told him.

Once Alec was put in his place and they had lunch, they went to check out the hardware store while Mom went back to work.

Chapter 8

Clay's Hardware still had the shelves, the counter, and every bit of dust and dirt it could accumulate sitting empty for years. It did bring back memories for Alec. Some of them were even good ones. He and Ian used to run in there when they were playing, asking to borrow all sorts of things. Their grandfather would always ask them if they had money to pay. They could usually talk him into giving them some odds and ends. Alec pictured him behind the counter and missed him and his grandmother.

"My granddad and grandma used to work here. Mom sometimes helped out, and Ian and I did too. Now Cory will be working here," Alec told Teddy.

He seemed to be in awe of all the generations that had stood behind that counter. Cory was less concerned with history and more concerned with how much work needed to be done to get the place in shape.

"Messy, huh?" Cory said to Teddy as they looked around.

"Filthy," Alec said.

"I suppose I'm in charge of clean up," Cory guessed.

"Look who's volunteering to help," Alec said and raised one of Teddy's hands in the air.

Despite being shanghaied, Teddy nodded once, determined to help.

"What a good kid. Thank you," Cory said while Teddy looked shy.

"I'll help too," Alec said against his better judgment. He just couldn't deprive himself of quality time with Teddy and Cory, especially Cory and his sweet ass. After Cory started working there, Alec wouldn't see as much of him or his ass.

That evening Mack Utley was invited for dinner. Mom had already hired him as Cory's hardware consultant. The poor old guy looked ill at ease sitting at their dining table even though there was nothing formal about their dinner of spaghetti and meatballs with a side of broccoli. He came to life though when he started talking about tools. He advised and Cory took notes. As he wrote, Cory looked like that kid in class who everyone cheats off of. Alec just couldn't help letting his imagination toy with this image of Cory.

After dinner, Cory was helping with the dishes while Mom walked Mack to his truck and talked his ear off. Teddy was drawing on the back porch. Alec sidled up to Cory at the sink and whispered, "Hey, do my homework. Come on. I'll make it worth your while."

It was all in the tone of his voice, but Cory got his point loud and

clear. He turned to glare at him.

Judging by his look, Alec guessed, "You've heard that before."

"A few times." He looked Alec up and down. "From guys just like you, who think they're God's gift."

"So what form of payment did you take?" Alec said while wiggling his eyebrows.

"Those guys didn't think they needed to do anything except look at me like they owned me," Cory said pointedly.

"Then they're nothing like me. I would have paid in full," Alec told him.

Cory rolled his eyes and turned back to the dishes.

Alec went close to him again and said, "Make sure you rest up tonight. I want you fresh for tomorrow."

"What?" Cory jumped. "What is wrong with you?" He was blushing as he pushed Alec away.

"I meant because we have to clean up the store. Anything else you might be thinking is all in your imagination," Alec claimed.

"Don't toy with me," Cory warned him. It sounded like a threat, the good kind.

"Or what?" Alec asked, a little excited by the gruff tone in his voice.

Instead of trying to warn him again, Cory looked deep into his eyes. Alec felt like Cory's eyes burned through him and at the same time like they opened more fully and he could plunge inside.

"Are you trying to start something with me?" Cory's tone was low and intimate, making the kind of insinuation that scared the hell out of Alec. As he felt a tremor right down to his bones, Alec was reminded of the kind of guy Cory was. He was the kind of guy Alec had stayed far away from until now because the message he sent out was, "Get serious or get out."

"Just passing the time," Alec said sheepishly. With his eyes, he kind of begged for Cory's forgiveness.

Cory smiled. "Don't worry about it," he said like a man who knew he had the upper hand.

So that's what it was like to tangle with an all or nothing kind of guy. Damn, they were scary. Alec looked at him with newfound respect based mostly on fear. He still checked out his pert ass though.

Early the next day, Alec, Teddy, and Cory drove to the store and lugged in some serious cleaning supplies. Cory gave out the assignments. Teddy got the lower shelves. Alec got the top ones.

Alec stopped to watch Teddy as he wiped. First he drew a picture in the dust with his finger then he wiped it. Cory came over to admire his work too.

"Mom said to tell you that Family Services approved for you to stay

with us," Alec told him. He noticed Cory's relief at the news and said, "That was never in doubt. You're Teddy's family. Plus Mom always gets her way."

"It's great. I was worried because I didn't get their approval before I moved in," Cory said.

"Mom handled it. Possibly lied," Alec said with a shrug.

"I'll make sure to do a good job for her at the store. Make her idea work."

Alec laughed at his eagerness. Teddy shared his brother's work ethic. He never stopped to rest unless they made him.

"Juice break," Cory called out and got the orange juice from the cooler they brought.

"You have any blisters?" Alec asked and turned over Teddy's hands.

Teddy looked worried until Alec said, "Nope. You're good."

"He's a hard worker," Cory said.

"So is his big brother," Alec said and watched Teddy's expression as he looked at Cory. The little guy was still absorbing the news that he had a big brother. Now and then he would look at Cory in wonder like he was a giant Christmas present he hadn't opened yet.

Cory really was something. Alec couldn't remember ever meeting anyone who was so low key and enticing at the same time. Cory drew him in because Alec wanted to know what was it about him that got his imagination going. In a moment of inattention, Alec imagined Cory was a gift for him and pictured ripping Cory's clothes off like they were wrapping paper. Cory stood revealed and ready. As he stared hard at Cory, what he was thinking must have shown on his face.

"Hey!" Cory warned him.

"Don't read my mind, and we won't have this problem," Alec told him.

"Your mind? I think this problem is located a little lower," Cory said and looked down pointedly.

They remembered Teddy at the same time and turned to him. He looked at them in confusion.

"He means that the floor is going to need a good scrubbing," Alec said.

Teddy looked at him like he didn't quite believe him. When Teddy was busy and out of earshot, Cory came up to Alec.

"Don't cause trouble," Cory warned him.

"You're the one causing trouble. You're trouble in a hot little package," Alec said and looked him all over.

Cory blushed and looked anxiously in Teddy's direction.

"I know," Alec assured him. "I've just been out here, not getting any. I'm not going to start anything." He stared at Cory seriously to let him

know he meant it.

"At any other time, I would be taking advantage of how hard up you are. I would be climbing all over you and to hell with the consequences," Cory told him. Then he looked over at Teddy significantly. "But not here and now." When he looked back at Alec, his expression was regretful.

Cory also looked damn gorgeous, and Alec wondered if he really thought Alec had to be hard up to want him. Sure Alec had said so himself, but it was only an excuse. Despite that, he decided not to correct Cory's wrong impression. Telling him, "I would want you any time, anywhere" wouldn't help them keep their hands off each other.

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Cory felt good about the work they did that day. He gave Miriam a report over dinner. She was pleased. Because she gave him the job to help him out, Cory wanted to do his best for her. Hearing about how hard Teddy worked, she called him "my little working man". Teddy looked so proud of himself.

"You were planning to pick up some tools in Beacher, right?" Alec asked Cory.

"I'll be going with Mr. Utley. I ordered a few things online, but he didn't like the prices for the rest of the stuff."

"Tomorrow we drive Teddy to see Dr. Minwari. That's his child psychologist. We can combine that with some tool shopping," Alec said.

"That sounds good." Cory already knew about the appointment and planned to go along.

"It's good you'll be going. Monica is nice, but Teddy doesn't like going there so she has me sit in. He's more relaxed that way. You can sit in this time if she says it's OK," Alec told him.

"I'll do that," Cory said though he felt nervous about it.

That night Teddy went to sleep earlier then usual, tired from all the work they did. Cory fell asleep pretty fast too, but something woke him in the middle of the night. He heard the door to his room open, but there was no one there. Whoever it had been hadn't closed the door, just pulled it part way. Cory could see a sliver of light from the small lamp that Alec and his mom always left on in the hallway.

Cory was up now, looking up and down the hall. He was just in time to see Teddy scurrying back to his room. As he was about to go after him to see if he was OK, he ran into Alec.

"Is everyone up?" Cory asked.

"I guess so. I heard Teddy getting up," Alec whispered. "He's done

that a few times. He looks around for me and Mom. I think he's making sure we're all still here. He looked in on you too, didn't he?"

"He did. It makes sense." Cory thought about how he had been left alone in some apartment. "I guess if that's what he needs to do..."

"He goes back to sleep OK after that. He's a good little sleeper," Alec assured him.

Cory still felt anxious about Teddy and about the visit to the child psychologist the next day. Maybe Teddy did too.

"Let him go back to sleep then we'll look in on him," Alec said seeing that Cory was still worried.

Cory smiled at how surprisingly thoughtful he was.

"Don't smile at me like that or I'll climb right into bed with you," Alec told him.

Cory felt an immediate reaction from his cock. He was glaring and not smiling at Alec now.

"That look is kind of sexy too," Alec told him.

"Go to bed," Cory ordered him.

"I want to check on Teddy." Alec pouted.

"Check then go," Cory told him sternly.

Alec tiptoed over to Teddy's door and then turned to give Cory a thumb's up. As Alec left, Cory went over. Teddy was snug in bed. Cory went in and kissed the top of his head.

"You worked hard today. Get some sleep now," he told him and saw him close his eyes.

Cory sat across from him on the other bed and watched him drift off.

When he left, Cory couldn't help but glance at Alec's bedroom door and wonder if he was awake. He pictured him in that messy room, stretched out hard and naked on a bed with disarranged sheets. Cory cursed himself. That was not a sight that would put him to sleep. After Alec's teasing, Cory's body was on high alert. It needed calming not arousing.

Cory's body was eager and ready to give itself to Alec. Cory's brain overruled it firmly. He was not here to screw around. Not that Alec seemed genuinely interested anyway. He was just playing with him. Cory wasn't one to throw himself at a guy who wasn't really into him or even at a guy who was. At his boldest moments, Cory would send out a clear signal and let the other guy approach him. Except no guy he met before was anything like Alec. Alec was the most tempting man he ever set his eyes on. Plus there was something about him. Between Alec's shameless teasing and his big heart, Cory didn't know how long he could resist him.

When he got into bed, Cory was still consumed by Alec. He called back the image of Alec's mouth. The slightly curving line was always on the verge of a smirk. Cory's hand was moving frantically as he saw flashes of Alec's mouth opening to take his cock. He could see Alec's tongue licking the head like it was an ice cream cone before he swallowed him down to the root. As Alec sucked furiously and Cory pumped to the same rhythm, Alec's blue eyes looked up, hard, promising him satisfaction. Cory's hips rose off the bed as he threw his head back. Gritting his teeth, Cory held back a moan and the sound of Alec's name which threatened to escape his throat.

Chapter 9

Next day, they started out for Beacher early. It was a sunny day, but Cory knew that both he and Teddy would have been happier about this trip if it didn't start in the child psychologist's office. At least they were getting that out of the way first.

After Seaview Pines, Beacher seemed pretty big. It was a modest sized town full of nondescript buildings like the one where the child psychologist's office was located. The office itself was colorful and bright, but Cory was as fidgety as Teddy sitting in the cheerfully decorated waiting room. Dr. Minwari came out to greet them. She was young and friendly. Her warm manner would have put Cory at ease if only she wasn't going to be writing reports about him and Teddy that could have an effect on their future.

When she introduced herself as Monica, she explained that she didn't like being called Dr. Minwari because she wasn't a medical doctor. Cory pointed to the nameplate on her desk.

"Ignore that," she told him. "Make yourself comfortable." She motioned to the floor where there were toys for Teddy to play with. Alec usually sat on the floor with Teddy, but this time she invited Cory to sit with him. It was a familiar moment for Cory. As a child, he had spent some time in offices a lot like this one. Just as Cory had once, Teddy knew he was being observed and couldn't relax. Monica asked Teddy about having a brother. Teddy smiled shyly, and she seemed pleased. As she talked with Teddy and Cory, she watched Teddy's reactions. Cory was pretty sure that she approved of how he was progressing. She congratulated Teddy on having a big brother as they left. Cory had been thinking of having a private chat with her, but he was too anxious so he put it off until he was sure he could make a good impression.

Stepping into the waiting room, both Cory and Teddy breathed a sigh of relief. Waiting for them, Alec shook his head.

"You're a matched pair," he told them. "Let's go shopping."

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As soon as the visit to Monica was over, Alec saw a big change in Cory and Teddy. They were both petrified on the ride over. You would think poor Monica was a wicked witch not a perfectly nice woman with the best intentions. Now Teddy and Cory were cheerful and looking forward to the rest of the day.

Their next stop was the hardware store where Mack Utley was

meeting them. Cory and Mack zeroed in on the tools they needed and let Alec and Teddy explore. Alec challenged Teddy to figure out what different tools were for.

"Most of them are for cutting off your fingers if you aren't careful," Mack told them.

Teddy tucked in his fingers, holding his fists against his chest.

"They won't jump up and bite you," Alec told him.

While Mack was chatting with one of the guys who worked there, Teddy was busy looking at a wooden board where different door knobs were mounted. He tried out all the ones he could reach. Alec went over to see what Cory was looking at.

"I want to see how they have things set up. We're still keeping the basics in stock, stuff people need on short notice," Cory explained.

"Your diligence is adorable," Alec told him, standing close, trying to distract him. "All these tools are inspiring some seriously dirty thoughts."

"I don't need to know the weird stuff you're into," Cory told him.

"You're the one looking at duct tape," Alec said.

"For purely business reasons. I like my hands free," he whispered.

"Tell me more. What do you like to do with your hands?" Alec asked.

Good thing Teddy came back from the door knob display to stare at Alec.

"I wasn't bothering Cory," Alec said defensively.

Teddy gave him a look that said Alec would be in trouble if he did.

As soon as they were done with the tools, old Mack left for a job. Now it was just the three of them, and Alec took them to the big thrift store he liked to visit whenever he was in town.

"Now the real shopping can start. This is where the real finds are," he said.

"Or eBay for us civilized people of the modern age," Cory said then some t-shirts caught his eye, and he started looking through them.

"We'll never get him out of there," Alec predicted. "Let's dig up some kids' books," he told Teddy.

The book section was pretty well stocked. Alec wanted to look for himself, but they started with kids' books. Teddy already had his eye on something. It was a Christmas themed book with snowy illustrations that looked like old fashioned Christmas cards. The story looked boring, but Teddy's eyes lit up at the lush drawings.

"What about this one? Looks good." Alec showed him a newer book with an interesting, modern drawing style. The story had something to do with giant animals. There was a rabbit towering over a house with

the face of a little boy peering out of a window.

Teddy liked that one too. He put back the Christmas book he was holding.

"You can have them both. You can have as many as you want. Look how cheap they are." Alec pointed out the prices to him and read them out. Some of them were a few bucks some were less than a dollar.

Teddy picked out a few more books, and Alec grabbed some for himself. Cory rejoined them empty-handed. He praised Teddy's choices then said, "That reminds me. Do you happen to know if they have comic books here?"

Next to him, Teddy became more alert. He even looked around unobtrusively for some place where comic books might be hiding.

"No. They do not," Alec lied through his teeth.

Cory grinned at him.

"I think I might ask someone who works here," Cory threatened.

"Fine. They do. Over there," Alec said, resigned to the inevitable.

Shaking his head with disapproval, he waited while Teddy and Cory chose some comic books. Teddy had a big smile on his face when they headed to the register.

"I got left out," Cory said seeing that they both had books and he had nothing. "We're sharing these," Cory told Teddy, who clutched the comic books to his chest.

"There is a porn section in the back, but it's all straight," Alec whispered in Cory's ear. "I guess I'll just have to be your porn."

Oh, yeah, Cory blushed. It was so easy to get him going. Fucking him would be hours of fun. He sighed then noticed Teddy. Alec tried to look innocent. As the three of them waited their turn at the register, Alec's eyes returned to Cory. He traced the lines of his face and body like Cory was a sculpture. Alec knew there were better looking guys out there, but none of them had this combination of beautiful eyes, a trim, sexy physique, and a heart so full of pain and love.

After their successful shopping trip, they arrived home late in the afternoon. While in Beacher, they had gone to a supermarket to pick up a few things the Smorgasbord didn't have. They got every kind of yogurt, of course. Teddy had one and then went to do some drawing. Instead of just putting away what they bought, Cory was cleaning the fridge.

"Now that's just borrowing trouble," Alec told him. "You're too helpful. Relax. We aren't that neat and tidy."

Cory was always ready to do the dishes. He had already vacuumed voluntarily. Someone had to put a gun to Alec's head to get him to do that.

Cory shrugged. "I worry about the social worker visits plus it's a habit. Growing up, I was always trying to be good, especially when my foster parents were nice and I wanted to keep living with them, maybe even get adopted. Something always happened."

"Do you stay in touch with any of your foster families?" Alec asked.

"A few of them a little bit. Usually around the holidays I'll hear from them."

Alec could tell that he didn't feel close to any of them. He must have lived in so many different homes and didn't have one of his own.

"You're all set now for a family so you can stop trying so hard," Alec told him.

"I can't help it. I got shuffled around, at the mercy of other people. Sometimes it seemed like for no reason, I would leave one foster home for another. We already have too much in common. I don't want Teddy to know what that feels like."

"He won't. You two can stay here as long as you like," Alec assured him.

Cory was about to make some objection when Alec asked, "If you were never adopted, whose last name do you have?"

"I didn't know either my first or last name when I was found. My first foster mother asked the court that I be given the name of her late father, Cory Bledsoe. He died in the Korean War. She was a social worker all her life. When she retired, she became a foster mother until her health started failing."

"Are you still in touch with her?"

"No. She wasn't well. I didn't stay with her long. She died when I was still little. By then I was already with another family. There was always another family."

"But never a real family," Alec said.

"I thought I was doomed. I thought if my real parents didn't want me, why would anyone else?"

"You don't know the circumstances. A parent without a job maybe, who couldn't take care of you..." Seeing Cory shake his head, Alec said, "OK. A parent who couldn't take care of you wouldn't leave you in an empty apartment and wouldn't leave Teddy on the side of the road. I was just..."

Cory smiled at him. "I know. I've done the same thing ever since I can remember. I invented all sorts of theories and excuses. Even now a part of me is expecting the woman with the rose on her wrist to drive down that road into town. Then I would go up to her and say, 'I'm your son too. The one you left sixteen years ago.' Does any of this not sound like a fairy tale?" Cory asked with a sad smile.

The expression on his face was heartbreaking. Alec wanted so much to take him into his arms.

"Just think about how much Teddy is better off now that he has you," Alec reminded him instead of getting physical.

"He gives me so much. I just want him to smile more," Cory said.

"One of those little smiles is worth a fortune. I want to see him open up too. Tell us everything that's on his mind. Every little thing," Alec said.

"You want him to turn into a chatterbox?"

"He'll never be a chatterbox. He's like you." Saying that, Alec looked at him with an intensity that unsettled Cory. Alec made him blush so easily, but he didn't look away. He shared a long, meaningful gaze with Alec until his mom burst in asking what her only son would feed a poor, starving woman.

"What woman? Where is she? I'll give her a can of soup," Alec said, pretending to look around and out the window.

"I mean me. And you will not dare give canned soup to your only mother who gave birth to you, and nursed you, and diapered you and..."

"OK. I'll make you a sandwich too," Alec offered.

"Use the good mustard not that yellow stuff," she said.

"Only the best mustard for the mayor."

As he made his mom a late lunch, Alec thought about how lucky he was. Everything Cory told him reminded him of how much he had. Even though his father died when he was young, he was still around to enrich Alec's life. Plus his father didn't leave him because he wanted to. He fought hard and hung on as long as he could, cherishing each day he spent with his family and every new painting Alec painted for him.

While Mom ate, Cory filled her in on their shopping trip. She had only good things to say. Alec wondered if Cory could tell that she didn't care as much about the hardware store as she did about giving Cory a job. Cory took it seriously enough for both of them. In Cory, Alec was seeing the same reserve, the same reluctance to ask for anything or to make trouble he had first seen in Teddy. Cory had lived a precarious existence. He grew up not feeling safe and secure, having to watch his step. It broke Alec's heart to know that Cory's need to be good was rooted in fear and a desperate yearning for a permanent home. Now that desperation was all on Teddy's behalf. Cory worked hard and stayed helpful and good so he could give his little brother a family he never had.

Chapter 10

It had been a productive and fun day. Teddy was tired and asleep quickly. That night after Teddy was in bed, Cory wandered into the den. He hadn't exactly meant to, he just felt at loose ends. Alec was cursing at his laptop in the kitchen. Miriam was talking on the phone and watching TV in the living room.

Cory stood in the den doorway and took in the room full of contrasts. Strewn without any order, Alec's new paintings were dynamic but painted in murkier colors. On the walls were the very different paintings Alec did for his father. Tender and vivid, those paintings weren't just the work of someone younger. They were the work of a gentler hand, maybe also a gentler mind.

For the new paintings, the brush strokes were rougher, the colors darker. The paintings were more alive. They had more Alec in them and less of what he was looking at. They showed Cory his restlessness and energy. Their subjects were people not places. Bodies, mostly male, moved over indistinct backgrounds. To Cory's eyes, these places were dark, intimately enclosed. He wondered if those were the significant places where Alec had lived his life before coming back home. The life in those paintings made him wonder how long Alec would be able to stay in Seaview Pines.

As Cory contemplated his paintings, Alec came in with the misbehaving laptop under his arm.

"I thought you were going to flush it down the toilet," Cory said since he had heard him make that threat several times.

"Wouldn't fit," Alec grumbled then he motioned at his paintings. "I see you are admiring my boys."

"Mostly wondering who they are," Cory said though he had been thinking more about Alec than his men.

"They are all the guys I've known and, at the same time, none of them," Alec said.

"I noticed," Cory said. "You could never be a police sketch artist. I assume they're unrecognizable because you couldn't remember their faces."

"Or their names," Alec confessed. "Not everyone is meant to be remembered. The same men I don't remember, don't remember me."

"You don't know that. Who knows how many hearts you've broken," Cory accused him.

"You think there is someone out there pining for me?"

Not out there, Cory almost said as Alec looked at one of his paintings almost like he was looking into the past.

"They are like people in dreams. You can't quite remember them when you're awake," Alec said, raising his eyes from the canvas with a far away look that turned to Cory and became sharp.

"Ah, those guys," Cory said with a knowing smirk.

Alec leaned toward him a little bit to say, "I assume that these days, I have the starring role in your nocturnal activities."

"Why are you so arrogant?"

"The usual reasons," Alec said with a supremely confident look. "There is no way you're getting an eyeful of this every day and not dreaming about it." Alec gestured at himself.

"Oh, my God."

"I don't hear you denying it," Alec pointed out.

"Fine. I might have dreamt about you a few times, against my better judgment."

"Against mine too. I came here to get away from the action," Alec said and allowed a more serious expression to come into his gorgeous, blue eyes.

"Did you get burned?" Cory asked. He imagined some hot and heavy affair that ended badly.

"A relationship?" Alec said with distaste. "No way. I got burned out. I was having too much fun."

"Yes. That's a problem," Cory said sarcastically.

"It can be. I was so busy partying, I didn't notice that my life was empty."

"So why come here?"

Alec cast his eyes around the room that probably held a lot of memories for him.

"It's a retreat from the real world. I had to figure out some things, and there were no distractions here, until now." He stared accusingly at Cory.

"Sorry to intrude on your life of contemplation," Cory said. He kind of meant it too. It was to Alec's credit that he welcomed Teddy and Cory the way he did.

"You mean my life of boredom," Alec said. "Thank God you and Teddy showed up."

Cory smiled at him. Not many people would say that under the circumstances. In a lot of ways, Alec was too good to be true, or too good to last.

"So once you have things figured out, you're going to move on?" Cory said.

"That's the plan. If it wasn't for Teddy, I would have been long gone already, bored to tears and on my way anywhere else. It wasn't bad here when I was little, but a grown man needs more stimulation." Alec's eyes roamed up and down Cory's body. It would serve him right

if Cory jumped him.

To avoid his leering eyes, Cory looked around the den once again, from the new paintings to the old ones. Now Cory felt like he understood Alec a little better. The high life he had been living had disappointed him. That's why he came home. He was reaching back in time and looking for something more for his future. The first thing that came to Cory's mind was love. But maybe Alec was looking for something different like artistic fulfillment. He could see in Alec's paintings how he saw the world, how he wanted to keep it at arm's length. There was also something in them that reached out for a connection. Or that could have been only what Cory wanted to see.

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After he was done interrogating him, Cory went to bed. Alec was left alone to think about what a difference Teddy and Cory made to his plans. They went right out the window once Teddy showed up. Alec only meant to stay in Seaview Pines until he figured out his next step. He had the vague idea of moving around until he found the right place for himself. Once Teddy entered the picture, Alec postponed all plans of leaving, indefinitely.

Seaview Pines might not be his kind of place, but it was perfect for Teddy. He wasn't a demanding kid. He was happy just to sit and draw, and he liked it when they explored the countryside. Since Cory arrived, all of his favorite activities centered around his brand new big brother. If he got to watch TV with Cory, sitting close with his big brother's arm around him, he was happy. He leaned against Cory and fought to stay awake. When he fell asleep and Cory tried to carry him to bed, he woke up right away. Alec didn't have any luck with that maneuver either.

And Alec never would have guessed that a little kid would be so nice to have around. Of course Teddy was a quiet kid with artistic aspirations. He wasn't some brat bent on raising hell like Alec used to be, with Ian egging him on and setting a bad example. Alec could see the two of them as children running, shoving, fighting, and breaking things. It was a wonder the house survived their rambunctious childhood.

But the house was a solid, old thing. Generations of the Benchley clan had lived there. The battered old furniture complemented it, still solid after so many years. Wood that had been rough once was smoothed down by age and use. Sharp corners got rounded off. Every decade added more rustic beauty to these relics of harder times, when everything was done by hand. It was like some kind of testament to what was meant to last. The house and everything in it were in

contrast to the life Alec had been living.

Like he told Cory, that life had been fun. Dazzling him with pretty distractions and noise, his old life seemed full to the brim. It was in the early dawn hours after a wild party that things had become clear to him. Through the alcohol induced fog that distorted his vision, Alec observed what surrounded him. The party was dying all around him. Semiconscious bodies were reclining in every position. Alec was no different, but he wanted to be. He wanted to be alive and himself, and live his life fully. As he sat against a wall, coming to this realization, he wondered if he would remember it in the morning, or late afternoon, whenever he happened to wake up. Already drifting off, he told himself not to forget.

Alec had always assumed that he was living the life he was meant to live, the life of the body. It was rightfully his however meaningless and empty it might be. Bodies piled up behind him, naked, hot and interchangeable. Forgotten names mixed until there was only noise. Sometimes even faces eluded him. Then he had felt the emptiness crawl inside him, hollow him out. That terrible feeling told him that he had to get away and figure things out.

So far he hadn't gotten anywhere. No answers came to him. His old life haunted his dreams, calling to him but not offering anything new. He put those visions on canvas, trying to exorcise them and also give them meaning. These were the images that crowded his mind until recently. Now Cory was taking over, pushing aside the faceless men, climbing into Alec's bed to claim him as he slept.

It was a good thing that the Cory of his waking life was better behaved or Alec wouldn't stand a chance. As it was, he couldn't help teasing Cory whenever he got the urge. Alec loved watching him blush. When his hazel eyes blazed, he was a vision. As long as Cory kept rebuffing him, Alec felt safe playing around. It was like lighting a match then blowing it out before it singed your fingers. The only problem was that Cory had a secret fire burning inside him. Alec had seen flashes of it and drawn back so he wouldn't get burned. If Alec fed that fire, it would mean trouble for both of them.

Chapter 11

In the short time he had been there, Cory was already seeing Teddy transforming in front of his eyes. His step seemed lighter, and he looked around more than when he first met him. When he smiled, Cory could see all the adorable gaps in his bottom teeth. His smile lit up Cory's world, and he wanted to give him a million reasons to smile.

Cory found that Teddy didn't mind if he held his hand when they went places. He never took Cory's hand on his own though. Cory didn't take it personally. Teddy probably just wasn't used to it.

Today they were just walking through town on their way to pick up a few things at the store. After they stopped to say hi to the ladies at Carla's, someone called out, "Hey, Jimmy." Hearing the name, Teddy caught his breath and turned. But then he lowered his head and wouldn't look up when Cory tried to talk to him.

Cory couldn't wait to tell Alec and Miriam. Once he and Teddy got back to the house, Cory waited until he got Alec alone in the den. Miriam was out of town until late, and he didn't want to give her the news over the phone.

"I think we may have a name. Someone called out Jimmy, and Teddy turned," Cory told Alec simply.

Alec set down the brush he was holding and took a deep breath.

"Did you try calling him that?" he asked.

"Not yet. I'm so used to calling him Teddy. It seems weird. But I'll try it out," Cory said.

"A first name won't help us find out where he came from. Even if Teddy... I mean Jimmy. You are right. It is weird. Even if he was speaking, he might not be able to tell us his full name. A lot of little kids don't know their last names."

Cory nodded. He was sure they would find out more from him soon. It wouldn't be long before Teddy or Jimmy started speaking. In his heart, Cory could feel the approaching moment. Whatever was holding him back didn't seem like trauma. Teddy sometimes looked sad, but there was no sign of any terrible fear. He didn't have many nightmares. Except for his need to have a look around and check that everyone was still there, he slept pretty well.

Cory went to find Teddy on the porch. For a while he just looked at him, then he sat down next to him.

"We heard a name today in town. Someone said Jimmy. Is that your name?" Cory watched his face carefully.

Teddy looked uncertain.

"Would you like me to call you Jimmy?" Cory asked, but Teddy's expression didn't change.

Later, when Alec was giving him a reading lesson, he wrote out the name Jimmy for him. He had Teddy ... Jimmy write it too.

That evening, Cory was using Alec's laptop in the kitchen. That's when Teddy or Jimmy came up to him with a drawing in his hand. It showed trees, a house, and most importantly, two figures. One was big and the other small. Underneath it said "Brothers". The letters were written in orange crayon, crooked, the lines a little shaky, but it was the most beautiful thing Cory had ever seen. He hugged his little brother and said, "Thank you" a million times. With tears in his eyes, Cory looked at the drawing again. He noticed that in the corner, it was signed Teddy.

Cory took Teddy so they could proudly show the drawing to Alec. Seeing it, Alec hugged him then kissed the top of his head. He praised Teddy and told him, "You did a great job drawing your big brother. That's exactly what he looks like."

In the drawing, Cory's legs were uneven, his arms too short. His feet, his hands, and his head were too big. His smile was even bigger that his head. That part he got right.

"That's me exactly," Cory had to agree.

Teddy looked skeptical but still happy to hear it.

Once he had sent Teddy to go get ready for bed, Cory turned to Alec.

"I guess he likes the name you gave him better," he told Alec, showing him the signature. Then he asked, "Do you think that's what I should call him?"

"I am no expert, but there it is." Alec pointed to the name Teddy.

At bedtime, Alec left them alone to sort out this Teddy/Jimmy issue. As Teddy was climbing into bed, Cory crouched in front of the kid whose true name he wasn't sure about any more.

"Hey. Which do you like better Teddy or Jimmy?" He then repeated the names slowly to judge his reaction. When he heard the name Teddy, his eyes brightened. When he heard Jimmy, he frowned uncertainly just like before.

"Teddy, it is," Cory concluded. He tucked him into bed, then kneeled on the floor next to him. As usual, he told him a bedtime story from his own childhood, a little piece of himself he wanted to share.

As he watched Teddy close his eyes to go to sleep, Cory wondered

about that other name, Jimmy, and what it meant to his little brother. To Cory, it had always seemed important to know his real name. Teddy was happy to be Teddy, and Cory was glad he had chosen to keep that name. It seemed right, like an extension of who he was.

He waited until Teddy was asleep to leave him. When he went into the living room, he found the new drawing displayed next to the first photo of them as brothers. It made Cory smile all over again. As he lingered there, he noticed the framed photographs of Alec's family. The first photo to catch his eye was one of Miriam holding a newborn, who could have been either Alec or his brother. The infant was red faced and crying while his mother looked much younger but exhausted. She had a soft, loving look in her eyes as she looked down at her baby.

It reminded Cory that he and Teddy didn't have baby pictures. His didn't matter but Teddy's... Cory got choked up as he thought about never seeing what Teddy looked like as a baby. That part of his life was lost to him forever. It made him want to chase down that woman with the rose tattoo and demand Teddy's baby pictures, no, his whole childhood. He wanted her to hand over Teddy as a baby so Cory could keep him safe and never let him go, never let him experience standing on the side of the road, wondering what kind of monster might stop to pick him up. Cory felt the sting of angry tears in his eyes, and he shook his head to drive them away. Through the mist of unshed tears, he saw the brothers drawing, and his vision cleared. Then he noticed Alec looking at him worriedly from the doorway.

"I'm fine. I was just thinking too much about what I'm missing and not enough about what I have," Cory told him as he traced the word "brothers" at the bottom of the drawing.

"I didn't teach him how to write that," Alec said. "He must have done it by looking at the photo I printed."

"He's amazing. I was envying all your family pictures," Cory told him.

"What's to envy? Ian has me in a choke-hold in half of them," Alec complained and held up one such picture.

"I assume you deserved it," Cory said with a shrug. He already felt more cheerful. Alec had a knack for driving away all serious thoughts.

"In my teens, I hated to have my picture taken," Alec said.

"A narcissist like you?"

"I didn't like having my good looks exploited," Alec claimed.

Alec was something else. Always dressed carelessly, paint-splattered half the time, he was the embodiment of raw sex appeal. A wicked gleam was a permanent feature of those blue eyes. His mouth was an invitation to Cory to kiss him if he dared. But looking at the picture of a young Alec, Cory thought that maybe things were tough for him

when he was growing up.

"A gay guy in a small town, it couldn't have been easy," Cory said. He couldn't imagine coming out in a place like Seaview Pines.

"It's not that bad," Alec said.

"Your mom is the mayor. That's how you get away with it," Cory told him.

"There is nothing to get away with. I keep it in my pants, which is easy because there is nowhere else to put it," Alec lamented. "That goes for you too. Around here, you'll be gay in name only."

"If only there was another gay guy somewhere nearby, like this house, or this room, or right in front of me." Cory stared at Alec, who tried to act like he wasn't there.

"Sorry, I'm not open for business. And even if I was, you aren't my type," Alec said and turned away.

"Say that while you're looking at me," Cory challenged him. He knew he wasn't anything special, but at that moment he could swear that Alec wanted him.

Alec looked back at him as if ready to deny it. Instead of forming words, his mouth closed into a tight line. He frowned while Cory grinned. It was nice to have the upper hand especially against Alec.

"That's what I thought," he said triumphantly.

"I guess you have some appeal," Alec had to admit. His voice sounded raspy, and he cleared his throat as he went back to staring at anything but Cory.

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Oh yeah, Cory had won that round. With his hazel eyes, a slim body, and an awesome ass, he wasn't Alec's type at all, except for those last three things. If Cory wasn't so earnest and serious about everything, Alec would have been all over him already. Seeing Cory's tender heart beating inside that hot, young body paralyzed him before he could do anything crazy. No matter how much Alec was drawn to him, it couldn't happen.

That would be easier if he could be coolheaded about Cory. In unguarded moments, Alec was consumed with visions of him coming, writhing under him, looking so beautiful. That wasn't fair. Alec didn't know how to deny himself. His life had been lived on the principle "Take what you want, don't bother getting his number, and forget his name." He was still looking for some new principles to live by. The one he had already discovered was "Don't do anything that will hurt Teddy." He was working on the next one. It went something like "Don't get involved with Cory, unless you just can't help yourself." Or was it "Tease him mercilessly, and if he makes a move on you, run

away"? That one still needed work.

He didn't expect a guy like Cory to be such a challenge to him. Cory was good, quiet, caring, considerate, unassuming, shy, hardworking. Any of those should have been a turn-off. At any other time, Alec might have overlooked those glaring character flaws and had him bent over and moaning for all he was worth. Then he would have dropped him cold. It was unthinkable to do that to Cory. All of Alec's old strategies were failing him at the worst possible time. The stakes had never been this high before, and the temptation had never reached so deep inside him.

Now the large living room seemed to close in around Alec. Looking away from Cory, he tried to pull himself together. He told himself there was nothing here he wanted or needed. That's when Cory took his chin in his hand and turned Alec's face to him gently. Cory's fingers caressed his face then threaded through his hair. His eyes drew him in more than the arm that went around his waist. As Alec breathed hard, he gazed at Cory under heavy eyelids. Cory's arms pressed him close, allowing no escape. The beating of Alec's heart was deafening as Cory leaned closer. His lips brushed only his lower lip. The hesitant touch of Cory's lips was like a question. He was asking, "Do you want this?" His next kiss was harder, demanding an answer. "Do you want this as much as I do?" it said. The terror inside Alec gave way to desire so strong that he had to give in. He kissed Cory back. He abandoned himself to the feel of Cory's soft mouth opening to him. His tongue gliding over Alec's, Cory let out a soft moan. It moved through Alec like a tidal wave that shook him apart, tore away everything in its path. All resistance was gone as Alec dove even deeper into that kiss. Leaving behind every thought that held him back, he pressed himself against Cory hard to let him feel what he was getting himself into.

When he heard the front door open and his mom yell, "Hi, I'm home!" Alec snapped out of it. Letting go of Cory, he rushed over to greet her and give her a kiss.

"What? Why? What is going on?" she said surprised by the sudden, uncharacteristic welcome.

"Cory was trying to have his way with me," Alec tattled.

"You poor, helpless thing," his mom mocked him while Cory stood in the hallway, red-faced.

As soon as her eyes turned to him, Cory told her, "I found out today that Teddy's name might be Jimmy, but he doesn't want us to call him that."

Immediately growing serious, Mom wanted to know more. Cory glared at Alec, who took the opportunity to make his escape. Cory mouthed the word "coward" at him. Alec waved at him and

disappeared into the den.

Chapter 12

A few days later, Cory was folding Teddy's laundry one morning and Teddy was helping. They were stacking the clothes on the other bed in Teddy's room, and Cory noticed all the superhero underwear.

"Who picked out this cool underwear, did you, or did Alec, or his mom?" he wondered aloud. He forgot to look at Teddy to figure out the answer until Teddy pulled on his shirt. When Cory turned, Teddy was pointing to himself, eager to get the credit.

"You did. OK. I forgot to look. You know you can talk whenever you're ready. I'll wait. I'm just happy to have you as my brother," Cory told him. He didn't want him to feel pressured.

"Me too."

Cory couldn't believe his ears. That hushed, little voice had come out of Teddy. Cory just stared at him and grinned like a fool. Then he kneeled down and hugged Teddy for a long time. "Thank you for talking to me," Cory whispered to him.

"Thank you for being my big brother," Teddy whispered back.

If he wasn't afraid it would scare Teddy, Cory would have burst into tears when he heard those words. Instead, he took him to Alec's room. He barged in without knocking, remembering too late that that was a dumb move. Luckily, Alec was just sleeping. He raised his head groggily, his hair a mess, and looked questioningly at the two of them.

"Do you have anything to say to Alec?" Cory asked.

"You look funny," Teddy said in a low voice, still shy about speaking.

Alec made a face then his eyes went wide.

"How abut 'Good morning,'" Cory suggested.

"Good morning, Alec," Teddy whispered.

Speechless, Alec sat on the edge of his bed and opened his arms. Teddy ran over to him for a hug. As he hugged him, Alec was teary eyed and overjoyed. He looked up at Cory.

"Did you cry?" he asked.

"No," Cory said.

"How did you not cry?"

"Willpower," Cory told him.

"I don't know what that is," Alec said, and he looked down at Teddy. "So you finally decided to talk," Alec said to him.

"Cory is my brother. I want to talk to him," Teddy said.

"Good for you," Alec told him with a smile and ruffled his hair.

"What about Alec?" Cory asked. "Don't you want to talk to him too?"

"Alec too. And Mayor Miriam," Teddy said.

"Mayor Miriam?" Alec said in disbelief. "She'll get a kick out of that."

"Is she going to be here for lunch?" Cory asked, eager for her to find out the good news.

"She better," Alec said. He couldn't wait for her to find out either. "I'll call Nancy to make sure."

After breakfast, Cory was antsy and dragged his feet about going to work.

"Did you want to stay home and talk to Teddy?" Alec asked, seeing the state he was in.

"He just started talking. I don't want to bombard him with questions," Cory said. That would be one advantage of being at work. He wouldn't be tempted to interrogate the poor little guy too soon.

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Cory had gone to work reluctantly. That left Alec to enjoy the newly talkative Teddy. Looking at Teddy now, finally hearing him speak, Alec compared him to the child he had met in the early days after Teddy was found. It wasn't just that Teddy had been silent. His expression betrayed nothing then. The first sign of life didn't show up on Teddy's face. It showed up on a piece of paper. After setting paper and crayons in front of him, Alec stepped back. Alec remembered how Teddy pulled out the crayons. At first, he did it uncertainly, looking toward Alec but keeping his head down. It was as if he needed his permission for each one. In front of him, a picture came to life on paper, vibrant but undecipherable. After a while, Teddy forgot himself and Alec. The crayons got scattered all around. He only remembered that Alec was there when he broke one of the crayons. Scared, Teddy stopped drawing, held his breath and hunched his shoulders.

"You have two orange ones now," Alec told him.

Hearing that, Teddy started breathing again and got a funny look on his face. He got that same look whenever anyone told him something unexpected. Since then, Alec had seen that look many times. He had studied and tried to learn all the expressions on his sweet face. The whole time he was hoping that Teddy would start speaking. That miracle had to wait for another miracle to show up. Teddy's first words weren't for just anyone to hear. He was saving them up for his big brother. Good thing there was enough left over for Alec too.

Teddy was self-conscious after being silent for so long so Alec tried not to ask him too many questions.

"Cory will be here for lunch and the mayor too. Let's do our lesson before then. Mom will want to monopolize you once she gets here. Go

pick out some books. No comic books," Alec reminded him. He had tried to sneak them in more than once with Cory's encouragement.

"Cory lets me," Teddy said.

Alec had to laugh. It was wonderful to hear his voice.

"What you said just now, that's a classic," Alec told him. "Cory has his rules, and I have mine."

"The other books are good too," Teddy said in his quiet, slightly croaky voice.

"That's good to know, little froggy," Alec said to him.

Teddy gave him an annoyed frown, wordlessly letting Alec know that he didn't like that nickname.

"OK. I won't call you that," Alec promised and kissed the top of his head as a way of saying he was sorry.

Teddy smiled at him before going to get his books together.

During the lesson, Teddy sounded out the words for the first time. Alec was so proud of him. When it was time for the writing lesson, Teddy had a request. "I want to write 'Cory'."

"I showed it to you before," Alec told him. It was right after Cory told him he was his brother.

"Again," Teddy demanded.

"What about me. Don't you want to write 'Alec'?"

"Later," Teddy said, deadpan.

"Now that you have Cory, you don't like me any more? Is that it?" Alec pouted.

"You're OK," Teddy said. "I like you, but Cory is my brother."

"I have a brother too," Alec told him.

"Ian," Teddy piped up.

"That's right. He's my big brother. I'm the little brother."

"But you're big." Teddy looked up at him as if the idea that he was the little brother was too crazy to believe.

"My big brother is even bigger than me. I bet my big brother could beat up your big brother," Alec said.

Instantly Teddy looked fierce, like he was ready to fight Ian himself.

"I was just kidding," Alec told him. "I'm sure our brothers would be best friends."

Teddy said a cautious, "OK."

"I'll show you how to write 'Cory'," Alec said.

Teddy became very attentive, like the name was magic. Alec kind of envied Cory though he knew he had to go through a tough childhood to get here and Teddy did too. After he practiced writing Cory's name for a while, Teddy turned to Alec.

"'Alec' too," he said.

"Are you sure?" Alec said to tease him.

Teddy nodded. He was such a sweet boy, so much like Cory. He was timid but when it mattered he had it in him to ask, no, to demand what he wanted and never let go of the people he cared about.

It was scary to think that Cory had that quality now that he was coming after Alec.

When Cory came home, Alec met him at the door and hugged him. Cory was surprised for a second, but he recovered his wits quickly.

"I'm not here for you. I'm here to see Teddy," he said.

"What's with the rejection? I just wanted to thank you for getting Teddy to talk," Alec told him.

"You don't like rejection? Remember that feeling when you're rejecting me," Cory said then he asked, "Has he been talking?"

"Yeah, it's been great. He's been kicking the crap out of my ego just like his brother," Alec told him.

"Good for him," Cory said and headed straight for Teddy to give him a hug.

"Hi," Cory said to him.

"Hi," Teddy said.

"Don't overdo it. Save some for later, you chatterboxes," Alec told them.

"Is your mom on her way?" Cory asked.

"Any minute now. But she doesn't know anything," Alec said.

It didn't take long for them to hear her car in front.

"It's the mayor. Let's surprise her. Say 'Hi, Mayor Miriam' when she comes in," Cory said to Teddy.

"Hi, Mayor Miriam," Teddy said when she arrived. He was so quiet that Cory wasn't sure she could hear him.

She gasped and looked like she would cry. Then she got a more playful look on her face and stared all around like she couldn't see Teddy.

"Who said that?" she said.

Teddy said a quiet little "me." Miriam came over to him and picked him up into a hug.

"You are just the best little boy in the world," she told him with tears in her eyes.

"Hi, Mom," Alec told her.

"Say 'Hi Madam Mayor.'"

"No," he said simply.

"How about you?" she asked Teddy.

"Hi, Madam Mayor," Teddy said in a shy voice.

"Such a sweet boy," she said and hugged him tighter. It was obvious how much it meant to her to hear Teddy speaking.

"How are we going to celebrate?" Alec asked.

Teddy looked hopeful but didn't say anything. Though he could guess, Alec asked him what he wanted for lunch.

"Pizza?" Teddy said in a whisper.

"That's the way to use your voice. Now you can tell us what you want," Alec told him. He ordered pizza then watched his mom tear apart the refrigerator.

"You didn't get the Heineken?" she said, not finding it.

"Cory was shopping. He can't get you beer. He's underage," Alec told her.

"Why didn't you get it?" she asked.

"Why didn't you?" he asked her right back.

"I'm the mayor. I'm a very busy woman," she said indignantly. Then she huffed. "I guess I'll have to settle for wine."

"Poor you," Alec mocked her.

"Yes, pour me... some wine."

"I guess you're not driving back to work."

"Are you kidding? I'm declaring this a holiday. Teddy Day."

"Cory takes the rest of the day off too, right?" Alec prompted her.

"Of course."

Cory was going to protest, but it was Teddy Day so how could he?

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Miriam couldn't get enough of hearing Teddy talk and neither could Cory. No one asked him any hard questions though. It wasn't time for that yet, and Cory was glad to put it off for as long as he could. He just wanted Teddy to be a happy little boy.

They sat around after lunch, and Miriam told stories about Alec and his brother and all the trouble they caused growing up. Alec had some stories of his own. He managed to horrify his mother with a few escapades she didn't know about. Teddy loved those stories. Alec and his brother were his heroes. That worried Cory a little. They were terrible role models. He hoped Teddy wouldn't get any ideas.

By the time they cleared up the pizza boxes, Miriam was already talking about dinner. To celebrate Teddy's new eloquence, the only menu she would consider was steaks.

Alec, Teddy, and Cory drove into town to buy them. Cory was ready to shout the news to everyone, but he didn't want to overwhelm Teddy with the attention that would follow. In front of the Smorgasbord, they ran into a middle-aged woman Cory didn't know. She looked from Alec and Cory to Teddy and said, "I guess it's left up to you boys to take care of this poor, mute child since the mayor doesn't have time for him."

"Mayor Miriam is a busy woman!" Teddy said, furrowing his brow at the woman.

She was so shocked that she was left speechless as they walked away.

"You told her," Cory praised Teddy.

A few steps later, Alec picked him up and swung him around. Teddy was surprised and delighted. From the look in Alec's eyes, it was clear how much he adored Teddy.

When they were coming out from the store, they spotted Bonnie. As she jumped out of her light blue delivery truck parked in front, Teddy stopped.

"I want to say hi to Bonnie," he said.

"Now we'll never get those home before they spoil," Alec said. He had given the steaks to Teddy to carry.

They went over to her just as she was stacking some empty crates.

"Hi, Bonnie," Teddy said.

"Hey there, little hitchhiker. Hi, boys," she said but just kept doing what she was doing.

Seeing she was busy, Teddy was ready to walk away.

"Give her a minute," Alec said. He stared at Bonnie until she turned around, her ponytail whipping.

"You!" she said and pointed a finger at Teddy. "High-five!" She raised her hand.

"You can't see his hands are full?" Alec asked her, taking Teddy's bags so he could high-five her.

"Whatchya got there?" she said as Teddy demanded the bags back.

"Steaks," Teddy told her, proudly.

"Why would you say that to a hungry woman? I skipped lunch. I could hardly hear the truck rattling from the growling in my stomach," she complained.

"Sorry," Teddy said.

"You work for a grocery store," Alec pointed out.

"I forgot to bring lunch," she said to him. "I'm getting a Philly cheese steak from Thompson's. It's not on the menu, but Rosie will make it for me," she bragged.

"She means Rosa," Alec told Teddy.

"It's Bonnie and Rosie, so it rhymes. We're best friends for life," Bonnie insisted.

"Does she know that?" Alec taunted her.

"I thought you were worried the steaks would spoil," Cory told him. "And we came over so Teddy could talk to her."

Alec gave him a dirty look. Cory ignored it and leaned down to prompt Teddy.

"Thank you for picking me up," Teddy said to Bonnie. Cory was going to be grateful to her for that for the rest of his life.

"No problem, little hitchhiker." She raised her hand for another high-five.

Alec grumbled as he took Teddy's bags again then gave them back.

"Now a handshake," she said.

That's where Alec drew the line, but Teddy turned to him to take the bags. What choice did Alec have? He took them. As he did, he gave Bonnie a warning look. She stuck out her tongue at him, and Teddy giggled.

"I think he was in on that," Alec accused him.

When they got home and Miriam heard what Teddy said to that unpleasant woman, she laughed and laughed.

"How can this day get any better? Teddy is talking, he's putting stuck-up b..." She quickly changed her mind about which word to use. "...busybodies in their place, and we're having steaks."

Though she was always cheerful, today Miriam was in the best mood Cory had ever seen her in. He was still apprehensive when after Teddy was in bed that night, she asked him to sit with her in the living room. Alec was in the den, so it was just the two of them. Cory was already worried that she might have some bad news for him. After such an awesome day, he felt sure there would be some kind of crash.

"Why are you nervous, honey? It can't be me. I'm not scary," she said.

"No. You've been wonderful," he told her.

"So have you. When I was hoping Teddy had some family out there, I didn't expect we would find such a gem. You are a treasure, honey. Teddy loves you to pieces. You're his dream come true," Miriam said.

"No, he's mine."

"The important thing is you found each other. Teddy was owed something good coming into his life and so were you."

Thinking of the good things in his life, Cory couldn't help but think of Alec as well as Teddy. Cory had already tried to jump Alec, forgetting his own limited appeal. Stupid, stupid Cory. Did he really think he could tempt Alec, a guy who had turned his back on countless better looking guys than him? When he kissed him, he could have sworn that Alec was interested, or at least desperate. It was pathetic to hope that Alec would turn to him out of desperation.

Thank God Miriam didn't want to question him about Alec.

"I wanted to know what you think of the place. Seaview Pines, this house. Could you see yourself staying here?" she asked. Now she

seemed anxious as well as hopeful. Cory could tell that she didn't want him and Teddy to go.

Cory thought about it. This was a place of pickup trucks and church on Sunday, but everyone was perfectly friendly to Alec though he was out. It probably helped that his mother was the mayor. A small town wasn't the kind of place Cory would have chosen for himself. A place so small made him feel antsy, but he could tell that Teddy needed to stay here, where things were calm and safe. For Teddy's sake, he would do anything and live anywhere. He told Miriam as much, and she understood both about his reservations and his commitment to Teddy.

"You're a good brother. You're staying here because it's good for Teddy. I know it's not where you want to be, but you might get to like it."

"There's nowhere I want to be. I'm just not used to living in a town this small. But I guess it's just the right size for Teddy. I think he likes seeing the same people and places all the time."

"Things around here don't change much. That same blue prom dress has been in the window of Liza's for a million years. That fancy little music box and the toy train in the church thrift store window have cobwebs on them."

"I think that's just how Teddy likes it. For now, anyway."

Cory could see how it would appeal to Teddy to see familiar faces everywhere he went. The comfort of a place where time seemed to stand still struck a chord with Cory too. If only the place gave him the freedom to be himself, he wouldn't mind it.

"I'd like to stay here as long as we can. I think it's good for Teddy to be where it's quiet and where he feels secure," Cory said.

"Is that the only advantage you see in being here?" she asked him, and his mind immediately flashed to Alec.

"I think you and Alec have been really good for Teddy," Cory said, telling only part of the truth.

"Alec is full of surprises," she said, shaking her head. "But the first time I saw Teddy drawing, I knew he and Alec were a perfect fit. It was just like looking back at Alec at that age. Teddy was so lost in it, like only a true artist would be."

Cory smiled as he pictured Teddy's funny drawings hanging in some museum as the work of an artistic genius.

"I planned to take care of Teddy myself, but Alec stepped up and took over," Miriam said with a pleased smile. "Until then, I didn't know he had it in him to take care of a kid. But Alec won him over right away, mostly by handing him a box of crayons." She laughed thinking of that. Then she just smiled. "Alec wouldn't leave his side, day or night. And that's what that kid needed – someone constant.

That doesn't sound like my Alec, but there he was, every minute showing that kid he could count on him."

Cory wondered if Teddy took to Alec, not only because he devoted himself to him and because of their shared artistic tendencies, but also because Alec was so confident and always at ease. By being sure of himself, he might have made Teddy sure of him too. Of course it was more than that. The most important thing was that under his careless manner, Alec cared about Teddy. Cory could tell that Miriam was proud of her son for how well he took care of a little boy who desperately needed him.

"I guess you like having him home," Cory said. Talking about Alec had put a special smile on her face.

"I do. I know it won't last, but it's still nice. I wish he would settle, come to live here, but I know he won't."

Cory considered that a word of caution not to get too attached to Alec. It made him worry about Teddy. He was attached to Alec already. There was no helping that. Cory would just have to hope for the best.

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As he went into the den, Alec noticed that Cory was at the mayor's mercy. Served him right. Alec got on his laptop and didn't even consider going to his rescue. Cory deserved it for the way he made him suffer. Alec found himself always wanting to reach for him, maybe kiss his neck, nibble on his earlobe a little, fuck him senseless. The memory of their kiss was too strong. He couldn't escape the attraction. He had an awareness of him like they were always in physical contact. Even now, Alec couldn't concentrate thinking about the taste of his kiss. Cory's voice reached him only as an occasional murmur from the living room. A few times Alec heard his mom laugh, but he told himself they weren't talking about him.

When she was done with him, Cory came into the den.

"So you escaped her clutches," Alec said.

"We just had a little talk," Cory said.

"No such thing. Never forget that she is a politician. Watch yourself," Alec reminded him.

"Maybe you should watch yourself. You're alone with me, and I've cut off your escape route," Cory said. He was obviously trying to goad him into something.

"So you're in the mood to start trouble you can't handle," Alec concluded. He remembered getting a similar warning about that from Cory and not listening.

"You started it. You flirt with me every time Teddy turns his back," Cory accused him.

"I'm not afraid of Teddy," Alec claimed. Actually he had a feeling that he should be, especially where hurting Cory was concerned.

"If you don't want trouble, why did you let me kiss you?" Cory asked, determined to break down his already weak defenses.

"I didn't want to be rude," Alec said lamely.

"And why did you kiss back?"

"It seemed rude not to."

"Should we see how far your politeness will take us?" Cory said, stepping closer.

"Definitely not," Alec said. "I'm afraid it's my bedtime." He tried to get by, but Cory didn't move to let him pass. Alec faked right then went left and went past him. As he got out of there, he brushed against Cory.

"I'm doing this for you and for Teddy," Alec whispered.

He heard an indignant growl in response and ran. Once he was safely in his room, he had the urge to lock his door. He didn't. His first reason was because it was ridiculous. His second reason was that he was hoping Cory would sneak in and slip into bed with him. Then, just to be polite, Alec would have to fuck the hell out of him.

Chapter 13

Cory woke up even earlier than usual. He thought about Teddy finally speaking and smiled. Then he remembered making another move on Alec and he groaned. His talk with Alec's mom should have been like a cold shower, but it had the opposite effect. Reminded that some day, maybe soon, Alec would be gone, Cory had felt a stronger desire for him than ever. He didn't want to miss his chance to be with Alec even if it was just for a while, even if it meant nothing and was over too soon. Knowing he was risking unbelievable heartache didn't stop him. From the door, he had seen Alec in the dim light. His warning look turned his blue eyes sexy and hard. With those eyes on him, how could Cory back down? Those eyes dared him and promised to make his dreams come true. Lying eyes. All Alec did was make a dash for it. What a tease.

That morning, Miriam made him take Saturday off. Cory liked to put in at least half a day for people who needed tools and supplies for weekend projects and didn't get them Friday. Miriam wouldn't hear of it. She did have something mayoral that she had to do and was gone right after breakfast.

Cory decided to put his day off to good use. First he told Alec his plan, then he joined Teddy on the porch so he could ask him a few things. Teddy was drawing but stopped when Cory sat next to him.

"I wanted to ask you about your mom. Was her name Charlene?"

Cory thought he was starting with an easy one, but Teddy lowered his head and frowned. After a little bit, he shook his head.

"Did your mom have a picture of a rose, a flower, on her wrist?" Cory pointed to Teddy's wrist to show him where.

Teddy looked down again, this time he didn't answer at all. Seeing him like that, silent again, Cory was concerned.

"Don't worry. She is my mom too, remember," Cory said. He couldn't be a hundred percent sure of that, but it made Teddy look up at him, bright eyed.

"When you're ready, you can tell me about her," Cory told him but decided not to push him on the subject of his mother.

Teddy pressed his lips together and looked down. Cory wondered what it was that Teddy was holding back.

He tried asking him something else. "Can you tell me what happened before Bonnie picked you up?"

"I was sleeping," Teddy said, and Cory was relieved that he was speaking again.

"Where were you sleeping?"

"In the car."

"And before that?"

"Mom and the man were fighting."

"What were they fighting about?"

"Me," Teddy said sadly. "They were yelling and saying bad words. It was too loud. I covered my ears like this." Teddy put his hands over his ears and shut his eyes tight.

"That's good," Cory told him. He hated to think of the kinds of things he might have heard.

Teddy continued. "Then I fell asleep, and Mom woke me up. She said, 'Last stop, kiddo.' She picked up my clothes and put them in the bag she used for stealing from the big store. She pulled me out of the car, but I didn't want to go. She said I had to or the man would beat me up. She said, 'Take care of yourself, kiddo. Good luck and don't say one word about me to anyone. Not one word.'" Now Teddy looked worried.

"It's OK to tell me. I'm your brother. And what happened next?"

"She put money in my pocket. Then she went away in the car with the man."

"Were you scared?"

"Yes," Teddy said and lowered his head, his face crumpled. Cory could only imagine what it would be like for a little kid to find himself alone in the middle of nowhere. Cory took his hand and held it.

"You know how Alec told you it was OK to cry?"

Teddy nodded.

"That means if you're upset or sad, you can just go ahead and cry if you want."

"But I'm not sad any more. You're here," Teddy said. He still looked sad though.

Cory smiled and hugged him. His heart was breaking for him, but he was happy that they were together now.

"Where were you before you were traveling in the car?" Cory asked.

"Different places. But the man didn't like me. He wouldn't let me sleep in the motel room. I had to sleep in the car all by myself and hide so no one would see me. Sometimes we all slept in the car. I had to sleep on the floor. I didn't like that. And when Mom was doing a favor for the man in the car, I had to sit outside, turn my back and cover my ears." Teddy looked upset now so Cory held his hand again.

"What was the man's name?" he asked.

"Sly."

"And what was your mom's name?" Cory held his breath.

"She told Sly her name was Mona. When we were in the little house with the mean man, she said her name was Dee Dee. But she had a

different name before. She said her name was Jackie when she was friends with the man who had the big dog. That dog was scary. And another time, she said her name was Bobbie." Teddy pursed his lips. "Those are all the ones I can remember."

"That's OK. Do you remember any last names?"

Teddy thought about it then shook his head.

"And did your mom have a picture of a flower on her wrist?"

Teddy nodded.

"And was your name Jimmy?"

"Yes, but before, it was Timmy and Junior. It was hard to remember which name I had. If I didn't answer, she got mad."

"Do you like Teddy better?"

"Yes. Alec said I looked like a Teddy." He looked more cheerful as soon as he said that. It was like his new name stood for everything good that had happened to him since he was found.

"You do," Cory told him. "Someone gave me the name Cory just like Alec gave you the name Teddy. I had a different name before, but I don't know what it was." For the first time, he thought of the name Cory Bledsoe as his real name. It didn't matter what the woman with the rose on her wrist called him. Lillian Bledsoe had given him her father's name because she cared, because she wanted someone to carry on her family name. And Teddy was Teddy because someone who cared about him had looked into his eyes, listened to a voice in his heart and given him that name.

For a while, Cory sat with Teddy and watched him draw. He was filled with more questions, but he didn't want to burden Teddy with them.

Later Cory went to find Alec in the den. He watched him as he painted just like he had watched Teddy drawing. Both of them were so absorbed in what they were doing. As soon as he noticed him, Alec set aside his paintbrush.

"It didn't go well?" Alec said, seeing his face.

"I knew I wasn't going to find out anything good, but it was still hard to hear," Cory told him. "He wouldn't talk about his mother at first. I was afraid he would stop speaking again. It turned out she told him not to say anything about her. I think that's why he wasn't speaking all this time."

"Because he wanted to protect her?" Alec asked with a frown.

"Or he was scared to say anything."

"The first thing Bonnie asked him when she picked him up was where was his momma and his daddy," Alec said. "Then Sheriff Hutchins asked him a million questions. Maybe that's why he clammed up. There was the trauma of being left, and he was afraid he

might say something even without meaning to. The best way for him not to say anything about his mother was not to say anything at all."

That sounded about right to Cory. For a moment, he felt exhausted by the burden that little boy had to carry all by himself.

"If I had known he was out there, I would have torn apart the whole world looking for him. I would have given anything to have him in my life, and she just threw him away." Cory was close to tears. His anger held them back. He would make sure that Teddy knew he was wanted, that he was worth everything to Cory. He just couldn't understand how anyone could abandon him. "And to leave him in the middle of nowhere. There were so many safer places to abandon him."

"Less chance of being seen," Alec said.

"She worried about herself instead of about Teddy's safety. When I was left, I could have died if the neighbors hadn't heard me crying. Instead of Bonnie, Teddy might have been picked up by anybody."

"He's safe now."

"I was never this angry before." Cory remembered years of wondering who he was and yearning for what he didn't have, not anger.

"You're angry for Teddy's sake. You are looking out for him like someone should have done for you. It took you long enough to get angry. He has plenty of time, the rest of his life, to be angry at her," Alec said.

"I didn't really have a target before. To me, she was just a shadow. She's more real to Teddy. How could she do that to him?"

"If she hadn't, you would have never met him."

"Don't tell me to look at the silver lining." Cory was too angry for that.

"You can look at it or not, but the silver lining is there. And not just for you. You guys are both here, together. Teddy has a big brother, someone who cares about him and won't leave him."

"I hope he knows that."

"If he doesn't, he will. You have plenty of time to prove it to him."

Now that Teddy was talking, he had to tell his story to the police. Alec, his mom, Cory, and Teddy went Monday. Teddy was understandably nervous and would only answer questions if Cory stayed with him. Alec had to wait outside, but Miriam was there. It didn't last too long, but it was still an ordeal. Teddy was exhausted by the time they were done.

As Cory carried him out to the car, he could feel how tense Teddy was. Instead of putting him in his booster seat, he held him the whole drive back. While he drove, Alec told stories from his childhood, and his mother interrupted to scold him for every scrape and scratch he

got. Soon Teddy was absorbed in the adventures and all the trouble Alec and his brother got into. Cory could feel him leaving behind the world of stark, government offices and becoming part of Alec's world of recklessly climbing rocks and trees, of brothers chasing each other through fields and trying to scare each other at night while their parents watched out for them constantly. That was the world Teddy drew and wanted to be a part of. That was the life Cory wanted to give him.

Chapter 14

Tuesday after dinner, Alec and Cory played baseball with Teddy on the field behind the house. They used Alec's and Ian's old equipment, and they were all terrible at it. Alec did admire the tenacity and effort both brothers put into playing. It was nice to see Teddy excited and running around. At the police station, Alec had seen the same blank stare Teddy had on his face when he was first found. Then Cory held him tighter and the look was gone. It was as if Cory had the power to chase away every cloud in his sky. That was just who Cory was, timid but strong and always sure of what was right. It was the reason Alec was no good for him. Cory knew what he wanted and Alec had no clue. All he knew was that they didn't want the same things. They were a bad fit. But watching Cory bravely trying to catch every crazy ball Teddy batted, Alec found himself grinning. He saw a whole life in Cory – sex, love, marriage, family, a lifetime of happiness. Too bad that life wasn't for Alec. He envied the guy Cory would one day choose to settle down with. Still, Alec was glad he got to spend this time with Teddy and Cory even if it was just a taste of sweetness before he moved on to a completely different life.

When they had enough of baseball, Alec and Cory grabbed some cold drinks and dropped into the wicker chairs on the back porch. Teddy wanted to draw them playing baseball and went to sit at his table, as Alec thought of it now. He remembered it years ago as the place where he and his brother fought while doing homework. They would be kicking each other under the table, trying to make each other mess up. Mom and Dad would be sitting and relaxing in these same chairs that he and Cory were sitting in now. Alec wondered if Teddy had it in him to cause that kind of trouble. He was a good boy, but he had spirit, just like Cory.

A little while later, Mom came out to get Teddy. She was taking him to Nancy's for kids' movie night. They all thought it was good for Teddy to spend some time with other kids.

After Mom and Teddy were gone, Alec and Cory made their way back to the porch. The sun was low and painting the horizon some crazy colors. The air was cool and breezy. Birds were singing to each other, and a flock of them rose from the woods at the end of the field.

"Did you stay behind to try to seduce me?" Alec asked, seeing that he was now dangerously alone with Cory.

"There goes that ego again. I was going to go, but then I realized Teddy would be starting school in the fall. I want him to be with other

kids without me there to distract him," Cory explained.

"You want to pounce on me," Alec insisted. "You think it's just a matter of time before I fall victim to your dirty methods of persuasion."

"It's not dirty. It's purely practical," Cory claimed. "Either we're each other's social life, or we don't have any."

"It's door number two for me," Alec told him. "I wouldn't have moved back here if I wanted a social life."

"So I have to suffer because you want to be a hermit. At least take a walk with me." Cory set his drink on the table and stared Alec down like he was ready to call him chicken if he refused.

"Will I be safe?" Alec asked.

"Get moving."

They walked out into the field where the grass reached their knees. Cory looked at the top of the trees where the sunset glowed purple and blue-gray. Alec only noticed it out of the corner of his eye. He was too busy watching Cory.

"Teddy is going to miss this place," Cory said.

"He doesn't need to miss it if you stick around," Alec told him. Even if Cory didn't believe it, it wasn't a farfetched idea.

"We'll stay here as long as we can, but we can't live here forever," Cory said.

"Why not? Mom wants you guys to stay. She'll need you even more when I leave. She hates coming home to an empty house. And you see she needs to be fed all the time."

"How soon are you planning on leaving?" Cory asked. He seemed to be afraid of the answer.

"I'm not going to ditch you guys any time soon."

"You will when you run back to your real life," Cory said and looked away.

"I'm not running anywhere for a while. Not until I have things figured out."

"The way you are going about it, that will never happen." Cory smiled now.

"Then I'll stay here forever," Alec said though he shouldn't have.

Good thing Cory didn't believe him. "Don't let Teddy hear you say that," he warned Alec.

"I won't. But you should think of this place as your home." Alec wanted to know that Teddy and Cory were settled and happy even if he wasn't.

"I go where Teddy goes," Cory stated simply.

"So the answer to all your questions came in the form of Teddy?"

"True. From now on my life is about that little guy."

"Don't forget to do stuff for yourself too," Alec said. He could see Cory devoting himself to Teddy and forgetting all about his own happiness.

"Everything I do for Teddy is for me too. I've wanted a family ever since I could remember. Now I have one." Cory smiled. Alec could tell that his dream came true.

"I'm happy for both of you."

"And how are you going to find out what will make you happy?"

"I'm meditating on the question. One day the answer will come to me." Alec looked up like the answer was supposed to fall out of the sky.

The evening was darkening as they skirted the woods. They walked among the trees that were scattered over the edge of the field. Looking into the thickest part of the woods where it was already night time, Cory asked, "You said you never got any action here. Does that mean this is all virgin territory?"

Alec looked at him suspiciously before he answered. "That's right. No groping and grinding in the bushes for me. No blowjobs with my back against the rough bark of a tree trunk, no screwing in the depths of the forest. Just my own tireless hand and everyone yelling at me to hurry up in the bathroom."

Cory gave him a bemused look for being so descriptive, then he said, "I can fix that."

"I like how determined you are," Alec said. He turned away from those captivating, hazel eyes and scanned the long grass. He spotted the familiar orange cat sneaking through the grass. It looked like a tiny lion stalking its prey. Alec looked over at Cory, who was doing the same thing.

"Is that all you like?" Cory stepped close. He wasn't letting him have any space.

"Ooh. Now things are getting interesting," Alec said. He felt like the heat of Cory's body was pouring over him as he looked into his eyes.

"Isn't it about time?" Cory said. His gaze traveled from Alec's eyes to his mouth.

"I never took you for the aggressive type," Alec said. His hands were on Cory's hips, lightly, indecisively. To push him away or to pull him closer, he wasn't sure.

"And I never took you for the shy type." Cory's voice was only a whisper. They were so close now, a whisper was all they needed.

"This isn't a simple situation," Alec said, struggling maybe just one last time even as his body was giving in, responding shamelessly to only a look and a voice and the nearness of Cory's body.

"But it can be simple. We'll help each other out." Cory's voice was

low and seductive as were the movements of his lips.

"Are we talking about helping hands or more?" Alec said, curious about how far he wanted to go. Giving up all pretense of putting up a struggle, he held Cory firmly as he pressed into him.

"We're not two closeted high-schoolers sneaking hand-jobs," Cory said archly. His body told Alec he wanted more than just the touch of Alec's hand. He was hard, already grinding into him.

"I wouldn't know about that," Alec told him. "I went to high school here. I had to leave town to get even a hand-job. I started late then more than made up for lost time."

"Is that why you have no use for me?" Cory asked, looking into his eyes.

Alec shook his head. How could Cory think that with Alec pressed against him? He had to let him know that he was wanted no matter what the cost. Alec ran his hands down Cory's back to his ass then he kissed him. The last shred of his resistance dissolved into that kiss. Cory's lips glided over his. The tip of his tongue played with Alec's, sending sparks of pure lust through his body.

It wasn't easy, but they let go of each other and moved further into the woods. They were half in shadow but still lit by the deepening colors of the sunset. Done negotiating, they abandoned all thought and went for each other like hungry animals, starved for contact with hard flesh. They struggled to get their hands on each other. Desperate to feel one another, they freed each other's cocks.

"Damn," Cory said when he felt and saw how big Alec was.

"That means you like it," Alec concluded, happy to be able to impress him.

"Don't be smug," Cory warned him. He was hardly able to take his eyes or his hand off it.

Alec took hold of Cory's cock and gave it one long, slow stroke as he kissed him. Cory was hard in his hand while his mouth was hot on Alec's.

"Let me show you how much I like yours," Alec said as he kneeled.

"I was going to go first," Cory complained.

Looking up from his jutting cock, Alec smirked at his eagerness.

"If you don't come, you won't be able to concentrate on what you need to do for me," Alec told him.

Cory's eyes flashed, but he didn't make any further objections, just shuddered as Alec fondled his balls. Cory's cock wasn't as big, but God, he was beautiful, plenty to keep Alec busy. He wrapped his lips around the head of his cock like a kiss. Cory's insistent moan told him to get on with it. Like a man in a trance, Alec let Cory's cock slide between his lips until he felt it crowding his throat. He couldn't remember the last time a cock tasted this good to him or fit his mouth

so perfectly. Pulling back, he let the tip rest on his tongue before he licked his way up. Eyes wide, hungry, teeth gritted, Cory urged him on, digging his hands into his shoulders. Alec took him in, tightening his mouth around his cock. His rhythm building until they were both dying for Cory to come, Alec worked the underside with his tongue and stared up at his hooded eyes and parted lips. Cory twisted his fingers through his hair, and Alec was glad he let it grow, that Cory had something to hold onto as he came.

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Cory was more than ready to take the first turn giving head. He craved it. But when Alec got on his knees in front of him, there was no way to overrule him without coming off like a total slut. Cory had already abandoned some pride when he offered to trade sexual services. But how could he not go after a man like Alec when he flaunted himself, taunted him and then ran away? Cory couldn't let him get away with that. So he pursued him without shame or mercy, and now he was experiencing what a man like Alec could do to him.

The sight of Alec as he licked up the length of his cock then circled the head almost knocked Cory off his feet. But he wasn't budging an inch, not while Alec's mouth held his cock like a vise.

The wind from the west brought the earthy smell of a freshly plowed field not far from there. Darkness was falling as Cory came, swaying, holding on to Alec for dear life. The horizon still glowed. There was just enough light to see Alec stand up with his fly undone. In the next moment, he was too close to see, kissing him. Pressing his hard cock into him, Alec let him taste his own come. Cory raked his fingers over the muscles of his back. He loved the feel of Alec's broad shoulders, the raw strength in his body. Planting his knees in the dirt, Cory opened his mouth and devoured him. He wanted all of him, but had to pleasure the rest with his hand.

Alec had been so practiced and sure of what he was doing, nothing like Cory's hungry, desperate sucking. But Cory couldn't help it. It was all so sweet and new to Cory, so tasty and beautiful. Alec was like a dream. Cory clutched at him wanting to make him real. He wanted to make him come harder than any man ever had. When Alec cursed and grunted, Cory took it as a good sign. He sped up, put more pressure into it and heard a deep moan. Alec gasped his name to let him know he was coming then he poured his come down Cory's throat. Cory felt almost dizzy as he licked up the last drops. He wasn't sure if he could stand up. He was relieved when Alec collapsed next to him.

"That's one of my fantasies fulfilled," Alec said between heaving breaths.

Cory was happy to hear it. As they sat on the ground, against a tree, Alec's hand was on his knee.

"I always wanted to have a secret rendezvous out here when I was growing up," Alec elaborated. "Some guy who couldn't stay away from me, who watched me from the woods."

"Sounds creepy," Cory said, disappointed that the fantasy wasn't about him. Not that he was surprised. "Anyone in particular?"

"Different guys from school. Whoever was looking particularly hot that week," Alec said with a shrug. He couldn't even pick just one guy to crush on.

Cory stood up and closed his fly. It seemed weird, but he wished he hadn't enjoyed it so much. He was already thinking about next time with Alec and the time after that. As he was telling himself to get a grip, he noticed Alec looking up at him.

"I have to paint you. I have to," Alec said with too much passion in his voice.

Cory was breathless, but then he came to his senses.

"You will not paint nasty pictures of me," he ordered Alec. "As far as anyone is concerned, I am a clean living, upstanding guy who is going to get custody of his little brother."

"Understood," Alec said. He brushed himself off as he stood up and made himself decent, or as decent as he was capable of. "I would never do anything to jeopardize..."

Cory interrupted him. "I know you wouldn't." He had to smile at how serious Alec got all of a sudden.

"I promise to protect your good name and take the secret of your nasty side to my grave," Alec vowed with his hand over his heart. He then put his arm around Cory's shoulders as they walked out from the forest into the field. The horizon barely glowed now. They watched the last of the light disappear with their arms around each other.

Chapter 15

That week they went to see the child psychologist so Teddy could finally talk to her. Cory was a little more used to the place now and didn't find it as intimidating. After Cory prompted him, Teddy said a very quiet, "Hi, Dr. Monica." Happy to finally hear him speaking, she let him call her Doctor. She grinned at both him and Cory and asked him to sit in again. Monica was thrilled with Teddy's progress though Teddy wasn't very talkative unless Cory asked him questions. To get him to talk, Cory asked him about kids' movie night at Nancy's. That got him going. Teddy wanted to tell him the plot of the whole movie.

This time, Cory got up the courage to stay and talk to Monica. They mostly talked about Teddy's progress while Cory tried to gage how likely she was to recommend that he be given custody. It was too soon to ask her about that, but before he left, she did say, "You and the Benchleys have done wonders. This is not the same kid that first came to me."

After that it was the social worker who wanted to see and hear Teddy for herself. When she moved up her scheduled visit, Cory wondered if he should stay home. Alec thought it was better if they followed their routine.

"You need to show her you are gainfully employed. Mom and I will be here, playing the perfect foster family."

Cory gave him a skeptical look.

"I promise I will not be myself for even one second," Alec promised. "I will be the quintessential responsible adult. I'll be you."

Cory wasn't really worried about him. He knew Alec could be serious when he wanted to be. Cory was worried about himself, that he was too anxious and too young to make a good impression.

Cory was at the hardware store obsessing over the case worker's visit when around 11:00 AM, he got a text from Alec. "Bringing the social worker to you. Hide the sex toys," it read. Even with no sex toys to hide, Cory was a nervous wreck. But it didn't go badly at all. The highlight of her visit was when the social worker, Mrs. Martinez, came in along with Alec and Teddy.

"And who is this?" she asked Teddy.

"That's my brother, Cory," Teddy told her solemnly. He obviously didn't enjoy her visit any more than Cory did though she seemed like a perfectly nice woman.

Alec was the only one who could relax under official scrutiny. He

was as laid back as the stray cat sunning itself on the porch.

Cory talked to Mrs. Martinez for a while. He was afraid of saying the wrong thing so he didn't say much. She had already been in touch with his old case worker, Mrs. Fitzgerald, and had heard good things about him.

"She is so happy that you found some family after all this time. And I am happy for Teddy and happy to hear him speaking. I don't know if the police told you, but even with what Teddy told them, it's not likely that the woman who abandoned him can be located. I don't know if that disappoints you," she said while looking at him sympathetically.

"I'm just focusing on Teddy right now, what's best for him," Cory said.

After she left, Cory breathed a huge sigh of relief and slumped over the counter.

"I get such a kick out of you guys," Alec said as Teddy let out a small sigh.

"How did it go at the house?" Cory asked him.

"She noticed the results of your nonstop cleaning," Alec said. "And she was so pleased to hear Teddy speaking, she put a hand to her heart. Not that Mom let him get in a word edgewise. She and Mrs. Martinez yakked it up like old friends. It was all good."

To their surprise, the next question came from Teddy. "Why do the paintings have to hide?" Teddy asked. He looked confused.

For a second Cory wasn't sure how to answer that, then he asked Teddy, "Do you like Alec's paintings? The ones he was hiding."

Teddy shook his head. "I like the other ones," he said.

"Well, Mrs. Martinez wouldn't like the new ones either. We want her to like Alec so that's why we hide the paintings," Cory said.

Alec looked at him like he was crazy, but the explanation made sense to Teddy. It was basically the truth interpreted for little ears.

"Flip that 'Out To Lunch' sign and let's go eat," Alec said.

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Alec didn't know what Cory was so nervous about. He always made a great impression. Easy on the eyes, soft-spoken and sincere, he was a mild-mannered dream. Of course Mrs. Martinez didn't see him jump Alec in the bushes, grope him into submission and suck the life out of him. That was the bad Cory he kept under wraps who only came out to torment Alec with that eager mouth of his. Damn. After that hot tussle in the bushes, Alec didn't know how he could stop what was happening between them. Hell, he couldn't even slow down. Only the vivid picture of Cory's heartbreak ahead could motivate him to put on the brakes. Too bad there were some other images mixed in. Lurid and

hot, those other images made him feel like Cory was sucking his cock again then licking up his come, and looking up at him with sex-glazed, beautiful eyes. How was Alec supposed to resist him now?

Alec looked over at him as they walked to the diner. He looked so innocent. No one would think he could bring a man to his knees with one look.

By the time they got to the diner, both brothers were happy and relaxed. Remembering his art criticism, Alec asked Teddy, "So what should I paint instead?"

"Trees," Teddy said.

"Just trees?"

"And houses and birds."

"Anything else?"

"Don't paint so many butts," Teddy told him.

Of course Cory had to laugh at Alec for that.

"Can I paint Cory?" Alec asked. Cory didn't miss the wicked look in his eyes.

"Yes," Teddy decided immediately, not realizing what Alec had in mind.

Enjoying Cory's pretty glare, Alec told him, "I have permission." He was sure he would get to paint him one day, all of him.

That Saturday evening, the four of them drove over to Nancy's house. As they stepped out of the car, Mom checked them over like she used to do when Alec and Ian were kids and they were visiting someone.

"Look at all my handsome boys. I'm the luckiest woman in the world," she gushed.

Teddy smiled shyly, looking even cuter in the process.

They went around and to the back. Nancy was hosting a barbeque in her big back yard just for them and the kids. Nancy's husband, Bill, was away as usual, selling well-digging equipment. When Nancy saw them, she gave hugs all around. Teddy looked at Cory for permission before he went to join the kids.

They watched Teddy playing with Nancy's daughter, Hannah, who was three. Her cousin was there too. Looking at him, Alec guessed he might be a year older than Teddy. Teddy knew them both and joined in naturally. The game seemed to be keeping Hannah from putting sparkly make-up on them. Teddy was doing a good job dodging her.

"Look at him running around. He's like a different kid," Mom said to Cory. "The first time we brought him to play with Hannah, he barely even looked at her."

"Then Hannah tried to put a butterfly clip in his hair, and he ran all around while she chased him," Nancy said. "She's used to playing

dress-up with June's girls. Look at her. She doesn't know what to do with a boy."

"Just like her mother," Alec said.

"Shut up," was Nancy's witty retort.

"I guess you've known each other for a while?" Cory said.

"Ever since she had a hopeless crush on Ian," Alec said.

Nancy turned to Cory. "On Ian. Not on that." She pointed a finger at Alec.

"I've seen Ian's picture. You have good taste," Cory told her, the traitor.

"She was part of Alec's girl posse at school," Mom said.

"The gloomy girls. We wore black and wrote bad poetry," Nancy added. "Artistic loner Alec was like catnip to us, but we all had secret crushes on Ian."

"You were no good to me anyway. Except when you beat up those two assholes who were harassing me," Alec said.

"What's this now?" Mom asked, ready to go on the warpath.

"Simmer down. It's ancient history," Alec told her. "These two guys in a beat up old car were passing through town. They stopped for gas and started messing with me. The girl posse swooped in and tore them limb from limb."

"We yelled at them and called them names, told them they had tiny you-know-whats," Nancy said for the sake of accuracy.

Alec saw Cory smiling at her like it warmed his heart to hear that Alec had such loud and obnoxious defenders. It was kind of nice. Alec remembered how annoying, sweet and fierce they could be. Only a fool would mess with girls wearing that much black eyeliner.

The adults settled into lawn chairs with drinks in hand while the kids ran around. Unable to get much sparkly makeup on the boys, Hannah had put a ton of it on herself.

"I'm pretty," Hannah claimed.

Her cousin had nothing to say about that, but Teddy wasn't as wise.

"No. Rosa is pretty," Teddy told her, sending her to her mother for consolation. He looked confused.

"Breaking hearts already," Mom said and called him over to coach him on what to say to girls. It all amounted to lying a lot.

Alec turned to Cory. "That's why he didn't know I was good-looking. You have a little straight boy on your hands."

"You don't know that," Cory said defensively.

"Make him dance. Then we'll know," Alec told him.

"That's a great idea," his mom said, having overheard those fateful words.

"Now you've done it," Cory told him as Mom got Nancy to put on

some music.

Luckily, Nancy put on something peppy and fast that only the kids could dance to. Even Mom kept her butt firmly planted in the lawn chair.

"You're not going to show us your moves?" Alec asked her.

"I have my mayoral dignity to consider. I start shaking my rump, the video goes viral and there goes my next election."

"What world do you live in?" Alec asked her.

"The modern world of YouTube and smear campaigns," she said while Alec shook his head.

"You want to see her dance that bad?" Nancy asked.

"No."

The kids did put on quite a show. Hannah's cousin danced like a little maniac. At first, Teddy just stood there and watched him with a frightened look on his face. Then Hannah got into the action. Forgetting her earlier grievance against Teddy, she took both his hands and started jumping around. Teddy did some crazy moves of his own. Alec saw all he needed to. He pronounced them all straight, but Cory still wouldn't accept it.

Alec made a prediction. "I'm telling you, when you walk that boy down the aisle, there will be a girl waiting there for him."

"Umm. The bride usually walks down the aisle to the groom," Cory reminded him.

"Not Nancy," Alec said. "That's how butch she is. She made the groom do the walk of shame while she waited at the altar."

"It's not a walk of shame," Nancy protested. "My leg was in a cast. It was Bill's idea to walk down the aisle to me. It was sweet!"

"You're not watching us!" Hannah complained. She had both boys by the sleeves now as they kicked and punched the air.

After dinner, Alec helped Nancy clean the grill. Through the kitchen window, they could see inside where Mom talked Cory's ear off while he did the dishes.

"Cory is the perfect guest," Nancy said.

"Yeah, he's always terrorizing us with his cleaning, vacuuming, putting things away."

"How horrible. I'll invite him to move in over here. If you are willing to let him go," Nancy said in the most insinuating way she could manage.

"Don't let your imagination run wild."

"It's not my fault you make an adorable couple," Nancy said.

"I don't know which one is worse, adorable or couple," Alec hissed at her.

"You break that boy's heart, and there'll be hell to pay," she warned

him unnecessarily.

"That's what I'm trying not to do."

"In what way? By staying glued to him all night?"

"I wasn't," Alec claimed.

"You pulled your chair close to him. You ate food off his plate and whispered in his ear," Nancy said like she was brandishing the smoking gun.

"I was telling him how tall and ungainly you are and how you can't find shoes that fit."

"My feet are not that big. I find shoes just fine!"

"Sure. In big and tall men's stores."

She growled at him and threatened him with that scary grill cleaning brush.

It was past Teddy's bedtime when they got home. Mom went to bed too. That left only Alec and Cory, and Cory was restless. Alec noticed him pacing on the back porch and came out to lean in the doorway provocatively.

"Look at you. You're ready to maul me in the woods again," Alec accused him or maybe he was making a suggestion.

By the troubled look in his eyes, Alec could tell that there was more to Cory's edgy mood than the need to get off.

"Let's take a drive," Alec said. He wanted to satisfy his restlessness in more ways than one.

Cory was behind the wheel of Alec's Camaro, letting off some steam on the mostly empty, country roads. As he drove, he told Alec about what was on his mind. Everything he had found out from Teddy had been eating at him, but it was seeing Nancy with Hannah that set him off tonight.

"That's the kind of mom Teddy deserved to have," Cory said. "That should have been his life not..." Wearing a mournful expression, he stared at the road ahead of them.

Alec already knew some of what Cory found out when Teddy spoke to the police. Though the police had asked more questions than Cory, it was still only a small glimpse into Teddy's sad, young life. His mother had shoplifted, sold and used drugs and who knows what else that Teddy didn't know about or understand. There were times when she was passed out, and Teddy couldn't wake her. Other times she acted strange and scared him or hurt him. They moved a lot and lived with different men, all of them lowlifes. Sometimes Teddy's mother disappeared for days, leaving Teddy with unsavory people or all alone.

It was hard for Alec to hear how Teddy had lived. For Cory, it was

an echo of his own forgotten ordeal. All Alec could do was remind him that Teddy was safe now.

After getting some stuff off his chest, Cory moved on to his next objective. When he felt Cory's hand on his knee, Alec told him to slow down. He saw him frown, not sure what he meant.

"If you want some action, you'll need to make a right turn up ahead. It's a dirt road that goes nowhere. It's half overgrown and easy to miss," Alec said and felt Cory's hand move up his leg.

Cory smiled and turned off the main road as Alec directed him. Once they parked and unbuckled, Cory was on him. His kiss was hard, voracious, shooting straight for Alec's cock. As Cory pulled back, his mouth slick from the kiss, he unbuttoned and unzipped Alec. In turn, Alec took hold of his crotch. At first, Alec only fondled him but didn't free him. He felt up his erection bulging against the front of his jeans. Cory was hard and irresistible. Alec freed his cock. Arousal raced through him, making him feel newly alive and hard as a rock in Cory's pumping hand.

Cory pushed apart Alec's legs to make room and slid down to kneel in front of him. Slipping the head of his cock into his mouth, he hummed and Alec writhed. Cory's mouth closed around his cock, tight and hot. He sucked slowly, pinning Alec's eyes with a predatory look. Alec's breath came fast. His hands were restless. Caressing Cory, he wanted to rush him, but he also wanted it to last. To leave his cock captive to that beautiful mouth was like an endless, wet dream. This was like no other back or front seat action Alec had ever experienced.

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As he kneeled between Alec's long legs, Cory sucked slowly, savoring Alec the way he hadn't that first time. With Alec's hands playfully mussing his hair, Cory got lost in the feeling of the cock filling his mouth. The sensation spread down his throat, through his chest then reached lower making his cock achingly hard. Cory hummed, sending sweet vibrations through that beautiful cock. He was willing the pleasure to reach deep inside Alec, to make him come like a volcano. But not yet. Cory wanted to keep sucking him forever. He couldn't make up his mind, torn between wanting him to come and never wanting this to end. This wasn't a matter for the mind to decide. Alec grabbed hold of his head to hold him in place. He pulled back to give his cock room then he flooded Cory's mouth with come. Cory came as the first strong gush hit the back of his throat. He shot, pumping into his own fist. Cory was swallowing and coming, lost in ecstasy as Alec looked down at him and caressed his face. Murmuring

his name, Alec wiped off the spilled come from his chin.

"That was hotter than I expected," Alec said.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I know you're no expert. You must have natural cocksucking talent. Too bad I didn't get a turn," Alec said looking down Cory's body to his spent cock. He handed him some takeout napkins to clean up.

"I can be hard in two seconds if you want a turn so bad," Cory told him.

"I have that effect on men," Alec boasted. "Out of the car." Alec opened the car door and got out to give Cory room to get up.

"Really?" Cory looked around. It was a dark, moonlit night. They were enclosed by bushes growing wild, smothering the trees growing among them. The place was hidden, but it wasn't like the woods in the back of the Benchley house. This was unfamiliar territory.

"Don't worry. No one can see us. And I need room to play," Alec said. That sounded promising.

With both of them out of the car, Alec kissed Cory, walking him backwards until he had him where he wanted him. The spot was grassy but still hidden by overgrown bushes. Alec dragged Cory down to the ground. Cory's jeans were unbuttoned, and Alec pulled them down off his ass. He lifted his hips rolling him on his back.

Alec pulled his jeans down past his knees and stroked the inside of his thigh. Next Cory felt a kiss, a lick then a bite along his thigh, each one closer to his cock. Alec's stubble was enticingly rough as Alec's mouth went higher and Cory panted. He was getting hard again.

The heat of Alec's breath made him shake, telling Cory how close he was. His mouth was almost on him. Then he made contact. It was only a lick and Cory squirmed. He wanted more, a lot more. Alec had something else in mind. His tongue slid up and down the shaft. His lips barely grazed the head. Stopping, he smiled at Cory's impatient groaning.

"Are you going to fuck me?" Cory asked. He wanted the answer to be yes.

Alec crawled up Cory's body and kissed his mouth. He gave him the disappointing answer with a shake of his head. Cory could swear that he was tempted. After a hard, hungry look into Cory's eyes, he got back to it. Lifting Cory's t-shirt, he kissed his way down his body to his hard cock. This time he started slow and teasing but sucked deep. He still didn't rush.

Alec had one hand on Cory's thigh, holding his leg in place. The finger of his other hand toyed with Cory's ass. The wet tip of Alec's finger circled his hole. Then Cory felt only the fingertip slide in and out as Alec's tongue licked up the underside of his cock. As his finger pushed in hard, Alec took the length of his cock in his mouth. The two

sensations combined. Cory's body went hard, every muscle stood out. Alec could feel it from the inside.

"So tight," he mumbled ecstatically around a mouthful of cock.

Two wonderful, long fingers were driven into him. Feeling them twist, Cory bucked sending his cock deeper into Alec's mouth.

"Sorry," Cory gasped, but Alec just sucked him harder. His free hand swept up Cory's leg to his hip to grab hold, not to keep him still but to pull him closer, further in.

Alec sucked to the rhythm of his fingers thrusting inside Cory. All the attention he was giving Cory had a strong effect on Alec too. He was hard again but out of Cory's reach.

Steadily building up speed, he took his time and finally took Cory over the edge. His coming was a sweet relief to both of them. Breathless, Cory reached down for Alec's cock, wanting to help him come. With Alec's eyes burning into him, he stroked him only a few times before he felt him come, spilling over Cory's fist. They both moaned and collapsed against each other. Cory pulled away sooner than he wanted to. It felt too good, not casual at all. He wiped his hand on the grass and refused to look at Alec. Cory didn't want him to see how happy he was, for the moment anyway.

Chapter 16

Idly wandering through the house Sunday morning, Cory wouldn't have minded going to work. He couldn't stop thinking about Alec. It would have been easier not to be around him all day.

Last night, Cory had been happy and fulfilled, sharing his passion, only to see it all drain away. Telling himself that that was what they agreed to didn't help.

A while ago, Cory had stopped expecting permanent connections. He shouldn't expect anything different from a guy who made it clear that wasn't what he was into. That didn't change how Cory felt. He wanted Alec more all the time. Everything they did together only heightened his desire for him. Being fingered by Alec had made him realize how much he wanted Alec to fuck him.

To distract himself from lurid thoughts of Alec, he let a painting in the hallway draw his eye. It wasn't one of Alec's. The signature read B.B. Benchley. He wondered if it was Alec's father's. When Alec walked by, freshly out of bed, attractively rumpled, Cory asked him about it.

"Benjamin Bertram Benchley," Alec said. "My dad."

Cory raised an eyebrow at the name.

"I know. I should have asked my grandparents if they were playing a joke on him. Too late now."

"I guess they didn't have your knack for giving names," Cory said. He went back to looking at the painting and some of the others that were mixed in with the family pictures hanging on the hallway wall. It was mostly local scenery though some of the paintings looked like they were done on beach vacations.

Teddy came over, and Cory picked him up so he could have a closer look at a painting of a meadow with two small boys running in tall grass.

"It looks real," Teddy whispered reverently. Then he leaned really close to it and studied it like he was memorizing every brushstroke.

"He was pretty good, I guess," Alec said.

Cory could see that Alec couldn't look at the paintings objectively. They were the work of his father's hands, a view of the world through his father's eyes. The deep bond they shared was reflected in Alec's blue eyes as he gazed at a painting of the ocean, a sliver of beach and some vacationers playing in the surf.

Teddy jumped down and went into the living room to get a closer look at the paintings in there. Seeing how hungry Teddy was to learn from every painting he saw, Cory resolved to do something about it.

When Teddy went his own way, Cory followed Alec into the kitchen.

"How come you don't teach Teddy to paint?" Cory asked as Alec poured himself some coffee.

"He doesn't need me for that," Alec claimed. "He's doing his own thing in his own way."

Though Cory appreciated the idea of letting Teddy choose his own path, he still urged Alec, "Come on. Let him paint with you. Teach him some stuff. Once you're gone, he'll lose his chance. How long will he have to wait for another opportunity to learn this stuff?"

"I'm not gone yet," Alec pointed out.

"You said yourself you are on your way out," Cory told him. He didn't want to get his hopes up.

"Don't rent my room yet," Alec said as if Cory was chasing him out of town and not fervently hoping he would stay. Alec sighed, "Fine. I'll add art to my lesson plan."

Cory was thrilled that his guilt trip worked, but then he wondered if Alec didn't want to teach Teddy because it would remind him of his father and dredge up painful memories. He had seen a picture of little Alec and his dad in front of an easel, each with a paintbrush in his hand.

Alec didn't seem reluctant any more though. He called Teddy into the den and asked him if he wanted to learn to paint. In reply, he got an eager yes.

"So what do you want to learn?" Alec asked him.

"Everything. I want to paint everything," Teddy said.

"What an ambitious little guy," Alec said with a smile, but Teddy looked perfectly serious.

Cory stayed to watch. Teddy was even more eager for an art lesson than he was when Alec taught him to read. It was all a part of how Teddy looked up to Alec. Cory remembered that when he was a child, he sometimes met people who immediately gave him a feeling of trust. If he wasn't under the influence of how attractive and arrogant Alec was, maybe Cory could see him more clearly. But Alec made him feel prickly and defensive, hot all over and resentful of feeling that way. If Alec only brushed past him, barely touching him, it got him going harder than full body contact with any other man. Sometimes he thought he would risk anything for his touch. Cory had to work damn hard to seduce Alec. But no matter what he did, Alec would never feel the same way he did. Cory wasn't surprised. He knew that Alec had his fill of better looking guys than him, and Cory had nothing to offer other than he was the only option.

Cory refused to be wrapped up in his shortcomings. He shook himself out of it and watched as Alec had Teddy practice putting paint

on a blank canvas. Teddy looked nervous, but Alec told him there was no wrong way to do it. Cory had to smile as Teddy placed a tiny spot of blue then looked at Alec for approval.

"Now you're doing it," Alec told him. His father had given him a gift, put a brush in his hand, and now he was doing the same thing for Teddy.

Looking at them, Cory had trouble believing that it was all temporary.

For the next few days Alec taught Teddy a few little things, but he seemed more interested in what Teddy would come up with on his own. It was like Teddy was a little explorer making discoveries on canvas. Cory accused Alec of just being lazy.

"We are seeing through his eyes. I don't want to mess with his vision," Alec said. "I want him to paint his world not mine."

Cory didn't point out to him that Teddy was already under his influence. He was painting Alec's world but also making it his own.

A few days later, Cory was home from work and went in search of Teddy and Alec. They were on the back porch. Looking at Teddy, Cory thought an art lesson was in progress until he heard snoring. While Teddy was busy painting, Alec was asleep in one of the wicker chairs. Cory kicked the leg of the chair to wake him.

"I wasn't sleeping. I was meditating," Alec claimed as he straightened up.

"And snoring," Cory told him.

"That was a mantra."

"What do you say, Teddy? Sleeping or meditating?" Cory asked him.

"Sleeping," Teddy said.

"Do you even know what meditating is?" Alec asked him.

"Is it sleeping?" Teddy asked.

Cory laughed then sent Teddy in to wash his hands so they could make dinner.

"You need to take this more seriously like Teddy does," Cory told Alec.

"I'm just the substitute teacher. I pop in a video and let the kids sleep for an hour if they want. Look how serious our Teddy is. When he starts acting more like a kid..."

"Your personality will suddenly change?" Cory said, not believing what he was going to say before he even said it.

"Stop complaining. Just enjoy me while you got me. I am the only game in town."

"That one fact is overwhelmingly in your favor. Does that mean you want me to pay you in sexual favors?" Cory asked.

Alec's eyes traveled over Cory's body like he was dying to see under his clothes. Just having Alec's eyes on him made Cory breathe hard.

"Maybe you could teach me some things," Cory said. He was now the one roaming Alec's body with his eyes, from his crotch up over his chest to Alec's blue eyes.

"I came here to get away from temptation, remember?" Alec said.

"I'm not a horde of man-sluts. I'm just a release valve. It will be just like scratching an itch."

"Not if I do it right," Alec said with a leer.

"Do me right then. Show me all that arrogance is well earned," Cory challenged him. He was sure that Alec knew what he wanted this time. From the look in Alec's eyes, Cory was sure he was going to get it.

That night Cory invited Alec to his room. Waiting for Alec, Cory was overwhelmed with too many feelings to be able to name them. When Alec showed up at his door, those feelings all crystallized into one – I want this man.

Alec smiled at him wolfishly, but Cory could swear he was a little nervous. That was probably only in Cory's imagination. Cory went up to him then veered off to lock the door. With a laugh, Alec caught him. He held him loosely from behind making Cory crave him. He pushed back into him for more contact. With his back pressed to Alec's chest, Cory felt Alec nuzzle him and lick his earlobe. Alec kissed the back of his neck and said his name. His voice reverberated down Cory's spine. Cory couldn't take it. He turned and faced him, ready to tell him to hurry up. Before he could speak, Alec's long fingers brushed over his parted lips. Cory kissed them, sucked on them. Holding him close, Alec kissed his way from his temple over to his mouth. Cory squirmed at the unexpected tenderness of it.

Cory stared into his eyes then stripped him quickly. Alec returned the favor, but he took his time. That allowed Cory the chance to admire him. Looking at Alec, Cory couldn't believe how lucky he was. As he circled him naked, Cory looked up his long toned legs to his muscular ass. Cory couldn't get enough of Alec's body as he lavished every inch with his undivided attention. He used his hands, his lips, his tongue and his teeth when he couldn't help himself and wanted to devour Alec. Just as he was ready to give his cock some attention, Alec pulled him close and started kissing him hard. He leaned into him until Cory was on his back on the bed.

Impatient for what was coming, he reached for Alec's cock. As he stroked it, Cory let out a moan. What did he get himself into when he proposed this exchange of services to Alec? This wasn't casual or easy. It was skydiving. It was swimming with sharks. It was petting a wild

bear. Cory felt he was out of his depth, and he would get swallowed up by the sheer force of Alec's experience, the force of his will. Cory was sure that his size wasn't all he had going for him. He had no doubt that Alec was a man who knew how to use what he had. Before he could prove it, Alec took the time to prep him. He lowered his lips to Cory's nipple as his lubed fingertip probed his hole gently. Once again Alec's fingers were inside him making him writhe. It felt like Alec would never stop so Cory grabbed his hand.

"Now," he said, his voice hoarse.

Cory shifted down and raised his hips and rested his feet on Alec's broad shoulders. Alec's strong hands gripped the backs of his thighs. As he shuddered in anticipation, Cory felt Alec spread his legs. He thumbed Cory's hole playfully and made him squirm.

"Remember to keep quiet. We don't want to scare Teddy and my mom with your yelling and screaming," Alec warned him.

"Don't flatter yourself," Cory hissed indignantly.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Alec said.

Alec wasn't wrong. That first touch of Alec's cock to his hole made him want to curse loud enough to wake the whole house. His own breathing was deafening in his ears as he felt the incredible pressure at his hole. He reminded himself that he wasn't a fucking virgin, but he felt like the first time a cock opened him up. Alec was pushing hard and holding back at the same time. He smiled at Cory then grunted. Cory wanted all of him even as he shook from the effort of taking it. The iron hardness of Alec's cock was almost too much for him, but God did it feel good. Alec was sweating above him, looking at him with burning intensity.

Sweating hard while trying to take all of him, Cory was shuddering. He felt like he would shake himself apart. He sobbed then moaned. He couldn't hold on. It was too much. Then there was Alec kissing him gently, and Cory almost screamed his name. He sucked on Alec's tongue and swallowed his name.

As Alec was fucking him and kissing him, Cory let his hands roam to feel the muscles of his ass and the roll of his hips as he pounded him harder and faster all the time. Cory was losing his mind to it. Not daring to touch his own cock, Cory left himself at Alec's mercy. But he was unrelenting, driving in deeper until Cory thought he might actually scream. That's when everything inside him tightened. His whole body hardened into steel and he came. In the throes of mindless bliss, he gripped Alec and made him come. Insane pleasure surged up his spine, brilliant and hot as he felt Alec come then drop on top of him, moaning.

Alec had nailed him down to his core but so heavenly sweet that Cory felt like he could live just on that feeling, and nothing else,

forever. The insane rush subsided, and Cory was a sweaty, spent mass of flesh that needed to breathe and maybe get a drink of water once he could move.

"You killed me," he told Alec. "I'm dead."

"You have my condolences," Alec said, out of breath too, no more energetic than Cory.

Alec was just a dead, muscular weight half on top of him. His face was against Cory's neck. He could feel both Alec's chest heaving and his hard breathing on his skin. Cory ran his hand over Alec's side. He could manage that much. He found that Alec's ass was a good place to rest his hand.

"You need to get it on a more regular basis so you don't unleash it all at once," he told Alec. "I'm just one guy. You needed like an orgy."

"You did fine. You're just inexperienced."

"Shut up. Don't make me sound like some virgin."

"Compared to me, you are."

"Stop bragging," Cory said. He could see Alec's eyelids were half closed. He would drop off any second.

As he looked at Alec while he slept, Cory tried to memorize him. It wasn't easy to have him so close and not to reach for him, to feel the heat of his body and not to lean into him and inhale his scent, not to feel the soft and rough places of his skin against his lips. Cory shivered when he thought that one day it wouldn't be a matter of willpower. He would be denied all those pleasures because Alec would be gone. Cory felt the pain of Alec's inevitable leaving. He couldn't help thinking, "What if this was the last time?" He had the urge to wake Alec, to spend every minute they had in his arms, making him come. Good thing Cory was too tired to do anything more than wrap his arms around him.

*

"Come to my room," Cory had said when he was sure Alec was too weak to refuse.

Alec hadn't meant to take it as far as Cory wanted. While Cory's eyes asked a million questions, he took Alec's hands and pulled him tight against him. The heat of Cory's body burned through his clothes then his skin, seared his flesh like a brand. Alec felt he had been stripped down to nothing. All his defenses were gone. Alec's body pressed against Cory's and told him everything he needed to know. The answer to every question was yes.

Where the hell was Alec's resolve? His mind, his body, they both betrayed him. Most of all his cock – it wanted to be buried inside

Cory. Alec was on fire for him. He felt heady and elated at the thought that he would have Cory. After fucking so many guys, why did the thought of having this man give him such a high? It was like Cory was some kind of crazy drug that hits you before you even take it.

At first, Alec took it slow to calm himself, but it had the opposite effect on Cory. It maddened him, made him claw at Alec like he would tear into him, rip him open if he couldn't have him. It was as if Cory was always reaching for his beating hart, wanting to hold it and own it. Every second, Alec came closer to giving it to him. With Cory's legs tight around him, locking him in place, Cory's whole body was a steel trap.

Alec watched Cory succumbing to pleasure. He was letting go, abandoning himself to the feeling deep inside until Alec was all he could see. Cory was the only thing that existed for him too. It was intoxicating to watch Cory's eyes deepen and take him in. In that moment, Alec belonged to him fully.

Alec was still under his influence as they fell asleep in each other's arms, but he was more sober in the morning. As he stumbled around looking for his discarded boxers, Alec was already rehearsing what he would say to Cory. He had to keep things from getting out of hand. Last night, he had been too horny to think, too ready to let himself go. From experience, he knew passion could seem like more than it was. He didn't want Cory to make that mistake and be hurt and disappointed.

How many times had Alec performed this ritual of sneaking out of someone's bed? As he tried to walk away from Cory as he slept, Alec heard the floor creak and he froze. Looking behind him, he saw that Cory didn't stir. Alec turned back and looked down at him. He never expected Cory to be such an awesome fuck. As he lay there, asleep, Cory was so peaceful and gorgeous. Alec didn't know if he should consider himself lucky or doomed.

Chapter 17

Next morning, Cory made sure to keep it casual so Alec wouldn't panic. He had to have Alec again. Cory felt like he would die if he didn't. It was too good. Why did it have to be so good? Cory had never been fucked like that. Once he decided to take Cory, Alec didn't hesitate. Cory remembered being overwhelmed as his big cock pushed in and how Alec knew to kiss him softly just then. He always knew when Cory needed more than just his cock, and gave him a reminder that it was Alec above him, pounding him into oblivion. Though Alec might be able to fuck just any hot, available body, Cory needed more. Alec knew how to give it to him, physically at least. The rest of what Cory needed, he would have to do without.

Good thing they were taking Teddy to see Dr. Wheeler for a booster shot. Teddy was nervous so Cory gave him all his attention. That made it easier to hide how he felt from Alec.

At the doctor's office, Teddy wrinkled his nose. "My nose doesn't like the yucky smell. "

"Do you want me to hold your hand?" Cory offered.

Teddy shook his head.

"I'm brave," he said.

"Yes, you are," Cory said and hugged him. "But I'm not. Maybe you could hold my hand."

Teddy agreed with a firm nod and took Cory's hand.

"I feel much better," Cory assured him.

"It's OK if you're not brave. I'll be brave for you too," Teddy told him.

"You're a good brother," Cory said to him.

Teddy smiled, pleased by the compliment. He held Cory's hand even tighter now.

When Cory looked up, he saw Alec gazing at them with fond amusement.

Teddy really was brave. Cory saw his eyes tear up, but he just gritted his teeth and blinked. Giving him a hug and a kiss, Cory told him that was the bravest thing he ever saw. He also reminded Teddy that if he needed to cry, it was OK.

"It's good to cry sometimes. That's why our eyes make tears," Cory said and turned to the doctor for confirmation. He said that was true.

"See, we all agree, crying is OK," Alec chimed in.

Teddy sighed. "OK, OK. I'll think about it," he told them.

All three of them laughed. Dr. Wheeler approved of the progress

Teddy was making. He told Cory that Teddy was flourishing.

"Whatever you're doing, keep it up," he said to Cory.

After the doctor's appointment, they had hot dogs for lunch and followed that with ice cream. When Alec dropped off Cory in front of Clay's Hardware, Cory noticed that he had a little time before the sign said he would be back to reopen. He decided to take a walk and try to clear his head of Alec. He thought of Palmer's Grotto as the right kind of place for gaining some perspective. The place carried a message: "Look what nature can do, you puny human. Now get over yourself."

As before, Cory heard the place before he could see it. The noise came to him as he walked through the thick forest. The water became a roar as he climbed to the rock ledge. Sitting on the edge of the stone and letting his legs dangle over the rushing water, Cory watched the river disappear underground. Its noise was soothing as Cory thought about last night. Cory had offered himself as a release, and Alec took him up on it. If he didn't like how that felt afterward, Cory only had himself to blame. He was a fuck buddy and that's all. He had to accept that. If only it didn't feel so good to have Alec inside him.

Alec was a living, breathing embodiment of raw sex, Cory's desire made into hard flesh. Having had a taste or two, Cory was filled with constant longing for him. Did he really think Alec could fuck him and not leave a mark? He felt like he had made a bargain with the devil and now he had his soul. Damn him.

He might curse Alec, but Cory was furious with himself, acting like some stupid virgin. Not that he had a lot of experience, but he had never succumbed to one fuck like this. He felt like Alec had claimed him and now owned him, and that was just stupid. And God forbid Alec found out what he had done to Cory. For one thing, Cory would never live it down. Worse yet, knowing that Cory pined for him would send Alec running.

Cory wondered if Alec could really leave Teddy after spending so much time with him. But his own mother expected Alec would leave. If Cory believed he wouldn't, it was only wishful thinking. It scared the hell out of Cory to think that Alec would be gone one day. He might not be able to keep Alec from ever leaving, but Cory would make sure he didn't give him a reason to run by telling him how he felt about him.

"What are you doing here?" a soft, familiar voice said from behind him.

When he turned, Cory was startled to see Rosa from Thompson's Diner. She was in her waitress outfit, probably taking a break from

work.

"Oh, hi. I was just meditating," he said with a smile.

"Really?"

"No. It's just something Alec says."

"Alec. I bet he's a handful," Rosa said as she sat down next to him.

"What?" Cory wasn't sure if she meant it the way it sounded or if it was just his own dirty mind.

"I didn't mean that," she said then her big, brown eyes widened. "Is he? Never mind. Don't tell me. I need to be able to look him in the eye and not blush."

Cory wondered if he should be keeping things between Alec and him a secret. It made him sad to think that. And anyway, Rosa assumed he had intimate knowledge of Alec so maybe it was a foregone conclusion that they were fucking.

Rosa saw him frowning and asked, "Is Alec the reason you're here? I sometimes come here too when I'm upset. Use this." She handed him a small rock.

"This isn't big enough to do any real damage," Cory told her.

"It's to throw in the water, not at Alec. First you touch the rock to your heart and then throw it into the water. Let the water take your troubles. It's something my dad taught me."

"I like that." Cory said. Feeling a little silly, he did it just like she told him to. He kind of felt better. He and Rosa sat on the edge and talked. She wore flip-flops, and he worried they would fly into the water when she kicked her feet. They reminded him of Alec, his natural recklessness. He wondered how far that recklessness would take them before Alec put on the brakes or simply left.

A few days later, Cory was about to find himself alone with Alec. On that evening, Miriam had plans for Teddy. "I'm taking this cutie to my ladies' night."

"Teddy doesn't want to go to your old ladies' night," Alec said.

"There will be cookies and cake," Miriam said to Teddy, trumping Alec's objection easily.

"That's dirty politics," Alec told her.

Teddy looked up at Cory.

"You too?" he said.

Cory felt trapped by those sweet blue eyes. He was terrified that he would have to go until Alec spoke up.

"That's where I draw the line. You can't have them both," Alec said to his mother, saving Cory or ensuring his doom maybe.

"I guess I have to stay. We can't leave Alec all alone," Cory said to Teddy.

Teddy nodded with understanding and gave Alec a pitying look.

"Let's get you ready," Miriam said. "I want all those biddies to turn green when they see what a good-looking guy I'm bringing to the party."

Now it was Alec's turn to look at Teddy with sympathy.

"If he had a little bowtie and a vest, she would put him in it," Alec said as they went to get ready.

Cory was all set to take pictures when they came back.

"Get your phone," he nudged Alec. "I want pictures. I want a mountain of pictures."

Alec smiled at him indulgently and went to get his camera not his phone. The camera looked pretty serious.

"Good enough?" he asked and took a picture of Cory. "You'll have so many family pictures, you won't know what to do with them," Alec promised him.

Cory couldn't help it. He had to kiss him for that. It was quick and hot, surprising Alec into a gasp. After it was over, Cory watched him lick his lower lip.

A million pictures were taken with Alec's mom all dressed up and posing and Teddy looking wide-eyed and adorable in a buttoned, short sleeved shirt tucked into his jeans. When Miriam wasn't looking, Alec untucked his shirt.

Left alone with Alec, Cory made up his mind to act cool and not give away how much he wanted him. But as soon as Alec reached for him, he gave in. His whole being opened up to him, like Alec owned him deep inside. Alec pulled him in for a kiss, held the back of his head and went deep. Cory didn't want it to end. When Alec pulled back, Cory was lost in his eyes. He stepped back so he could pull himself together, kind of.

"So what's the plan? Do I strip right here and now?" Cory asked, seeing that he was doomed anyway.

"Eager. I like that. But keep your clothes on. We're going out," Alec said with a smirk.

"Where is there to go?" Cory wondered. He imagined some smoky, gay hangout in the middle of nowhere.

"I told you I know all the good places. Come on," he said and took Cory by the hand, leading him out the door.

"Are we holding hands now?" Cory asked. He pulled away because his whole body was on fire just from the touch of Alec's hand.

Alec reached for his ass instead.

To Cory's surprise, they didn't go to the car. Alec took him straight into the woods behind the house. It was cool and shadowy. The ground was soft with fallen pine needles muffling their footsteps.

Walking among the shadows lit by the deep red of the setting sun felt sweet and mysterious because Alec was by his side. They were more together so far away from any other living soul. They didn't talk. It was as if the hush of the forest silenced them.

After about half an hour and seeing nothing but trees, they came across a house. It was a one story, wood cabin that seemed to grow out of the forest. Cory just stared at it for a while, noticing all the signs that told him it was abandoned. Some of the windows were boarded up. Others were covered in grime. A small shrub had grown right through the front steps. The front door was barred and padlocked.

"Are you taking me to a haunted house?" Cory asked.

"Not as far as I know," Alec said as he went around to the side of the house.

There a bush had completely covered a window.

"Whose house is this?" Cory wanted to know as Alec pushed his way through the branches blocking the window.

"Johansen family. The last of them moved away years ago."

After a few tries, Alec pushed open the window. He held it open and invited Cory to climb through.

"So we're trespassing," Cory said, not moving.

"We aren't the first."

"Don't tell me this is the local fuck spot," Cory said as he finally climbed in and Alec followed.

"Not really. It's too out of the way. Vagrants are more likely to break in here than local teenagers. The sheriff is always boarding up broken windows. The bottom line is that we have complete privacy," Alec said and grabbed Cory by the ass to pull him close. Pressed up against him, Cory could feel his hard-on, and he immediately got hard himself, wanting it.

First, Cory looked around. There was still some light coming in, but the interior was pretty dark. It was all wood beams and a few pieces of furniture that identified the space as a living area and kitchen. Walking into the next room, Cory saw the bed and looked over at Alec.

"Is this our real destination?" Cory asked as he eyed the relatively clean but bare mattress.

"Unless you want it on the floor or against the wall. I'm up for anything," Alec said. He came up behind Cory and wrapped him up in his arms. Slipping his hand under his t-shirt, he kissed Cory's neck. It all reminded Cory of the last time. Only the location was different.

"We could have done this at the house too," Cory pointed out, sounding a little breathless already, and Alec hadn't even done anything to him.

Alec's hand moved lower, sneaking inside the front of Cory's jeans.

"And worry about being interrupted by Mom's early return? Nope. This is real privacy," Alec whispered in his ear.

Cory's skin got burning hot under Alec's touch. Turning to him, he pushed his hand under Alec's t-shirt to give him a taste. He pinched his nipples lightly. Alec breathed raggedly then kissed him, letting his tongue explore Cory's mouth. On fire for each other, they were grinding in a frenzy of clothes flying off.

Cory made Alec lie down so he could explore him. Long limbs stretched out in front of him. Alec's muscles were bulging, curving, begging for Cory's hands to run over them and memorize them. Cory licked up from his navel to one nipple then the other. He gave each a quick nip before giving Alec a hard kiss on the mouth then moving back down.

Alec was a feast and Cory was in ecstasy, but Alec didn't let him play for long. He flipped them over so he was on top. Straddling him, Alec skimmed his lips over Cory's chest until he reached his nipple. He sucked it and bit it as Cory arched his back. As he licked his way down, he let Cory's overheated skin feel the wetness of his tongue then the edge of his teeth. Not stopping until he reached Cory's cock, he took it in his mouth. It was wonderful, but Cory didn't want to come like that.

"I'll..." Cory tried to warn him, but Alec just kept sucking until he had what he wanted – Cory's come filling his mouth.

"Damn it," Cory cursed.

"Don't worry. That was just an appetizer. I want you to last when I fuck you," Alec assured him.

Cory smiled up at Alec and pulled him down.

"Look at you so happy," Alec teased him. "I wouldn't drag you all the way out here and then shortchange you."

"You just want to exhaust me," Cory said.

"Just making the most of the time we have."

"So that's a yes."

Cory recharged quickly, and Alec was barely able to hold back until he did. Cory could feel the effort as Alec's whole body tensed and shuddered under Cory's touch. He still took his time and made sure Cory was ready to take his cock.

They started with Cory on his hands and knees. Gripping him firmly by the hip, Alec held him in place. With his other hand, he rubbed his back as he pushed in. It wasn't any easier than last time. Cory was sweating and moaning with the effort. Being able to make noise and let it out was a relief. He liked hearing Alec grunt and moan too, but he hated it when he stopped and pulled out.

"Why, why, why?" Cory asked, furious.

"On your back. I need to see you," Alec said as he panted and laughed at Cory.

"What the hell for?" Cory said, but he did as he was told. He wasn't about to cause trouble. He needed Alec back inside him. Plus he loved looking at him and having Alec's eyes on him even if he didn't want to admit it.

As Alec pushed in again, Cory let out a long, loud moan. Alec was ramming in deep just the way Cory needed. At first he gave him a deep, slow fuck. It was amazing. Every thick inch sinking into him was more intense than the last. Cory's dick turned to steel. When Alec picked up speed, Cory went out of his mind. Alec's hips hammered against him. Cory thought he might get shoved right off the bed from the force of it.

By the end, Cory was crazed with the need to come. His whole body was just raw nerve endings that only craved Alec and more Alec all the time. Cory threw his head back. The roof beams whirled above as if Alec had set them into motion, as if he had spun the world just to give Cory the best ride of his life. The intensity of the pleasure made him lose all his senses. There was only that one sensation building, surging through him. It burst out of him as Alec kissed him. Alec was still pumping in and out right through Cory's orgasm, desperate to come. Cory was coming with an explosion of pleasure so white hot, he was blind and deaf and as mindless as an animal. There was only one thought in his head – Alec, Alec. It echoed inside him where he made it stay. He wasn't going to call out the name of a man who didn't love him no matter how good he made him feel. Cory almost bit his tongue trying not to say Alec's name. As their bodies crashed together, Cory willed himself not to scream out his name as he watched him come.

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From the first kiss, Alec was lost in Cory. His eyes were soft and gleaming with lust. As he lay on the bed, Cory's skin vibrated under his touch. Alec had to make him come. More than that, he had to taste him.

Cory's passion was unlimited. Arching under him, rising for more, pulsing around him like a heartbeat, he was always asking for more. Alec fucked like a madman, driven deep inside him. He fucked him so hard that it scared him, but Cory was with him, rising for it. As crazy as Alec, he wanted it as hard as Alec gave it to him.

Sweating and moaning under his pounding, Cory held him down like an anchor holds a ship, nailing him into place with his body and his eyes. With his mouth almost forming his name but never saying it aloud, Cory came closing around him like a fist, pumping Alec and

sending him into an abyss of pure pleasure.

Cory's eyes glazed over. His lips parted. Still breathing hard and moaning softly, Cory let his hands slide all over Alec. The caress was aimless and careless over his slick body. Alec pulled him close and made Cory wrap his body around him. While Cory's moans subsided in his ear, Alec leaned back with Cory exhausted and boneless in his arms. God, he was good to fuck and to hold.

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Enfolded in Alec's arms, Cory felt so good. It was hard for him to believe that this was sex and nothing more. In the quiet of the night, he felt like nothing else in the dark world existed except for Alec's breathing, his warm, hard body pressed against him, his arm heavy across Cory's back.

Cory didn't realize he had drifted off until he woke up gasping for breath.

"It's OK. You're awake now. Breathe," someone told him. It was Alec.

Cory looked around, remembering where he was as he saw moonbeams lighting the wood on the walls.

"Shit. Sorry," Cory said, getting his breathing under control though his heart still raced. "I was dreaming about Teddy. He was on the side of the road, and a black car stopped. He got in and disappeared. Just disappeared, like he never existed." Cory's feeling of panic renewed at that terrifying sight.

Alec held him tighter and soothed him.

"Shh. Bonnie picked him up. Scatterbrained, drives like crazy and talks a mile a minute, that Bonnie, and she's as harmless as a kitten," Alec whispered to him and pushed sweat soaked hair off his face.

Now Cory had trouble breathing because he wanted to cry with relief and also go and hug Bonnie for being the one who picked up Teddy that day. He hugged Alec instead. Alec kept holding him and told him that Teddy was safe. Still in Alec's arms, Cory slumped back into bed. With Alec smoothing his hair gently, Cory felt his eyelids getting heavy. In Alec's embrace, Cory would have no trouble falling asleep again. Just as his eyes started to close, he thought of Teddy coming home. His eyes snapped open, and he sat up, dislodging Alec.

Cory dressed hurriedly only able to find some of his clothes after he found his phone and used it as a flashlight. By throwing his clothes at him, he encouraged Alec to get dressed too.

"Hurry up!" Cory said when Alec didn't move fast enough. "I will not have my brand new little brother worrying about where I am this late at night."

"Teddy is with Mom and her cronies," Alec said, but he did put on

his clothes.

"They might be back by now. Come on. Move it!" Cory said pulling him up by the arm. "I don't want to get lost out there." Otherwise he was ready to go without him.

"A big bad wolf might eat you," Alec teased, groping him.

He stood up too close to Cory and ground into him. As he felt Alec's teeth graze his throat, Cory stroked his hair only for a second. Pushing him away, he lit the way with his phone. When they got outside, Alec stopped Cory and texted his mother. After reading her reply, he said to Cory, "They're still at Lilah's. So we don't need to break our necks rushing through the woods in the dark. OK?"

"Fine," Cory said grudgingly.

"We might even have time for..."

"No!" Cory grabbed his hand to get it off his ass and to get him to move.

"We're holding hands now?" Alec said as they walked.

Cory let go quickly and Alec laughed. It sounded strange and loud in the dark forest, kind of creepy. Cory jumped when Alec slipped an arm around his waist.

"We'll trip over each other walking like this," Cory complained and pushed his hand away.

Alec still stuck close to him and sometimes stopped to kiss him.

Chapter 18

Rosa had stopped by Clay's Hardware on her lunch break. She brought a meatball sub to share with Cory. They were eating it when Alec walked in with Teddy carrying lunch. Teddy was delighted to see Rosa. Alec was not.

"Lunchtime," Teddy announced from the door.

Hearing his sweet voice was all Cory needed to make him smile.

"You hussy," Alec said. His voice had the opposite effect.

"Me or her?" Cory asked.

"Both," Alec said then looked down at Teddy who was confused.

"Alec is jealous," Cory explained.

Teddy shook his head and then looked at Rosa and smiled.

"If I'd known you were coming, I would have brought lunch for you too," Rosa said to Teddy.

"That's better," Alec said as he set his lunch on the counter loudly.

"Not for you," Rosa told him.

"Then you don't get dessert," Alec told her. He had brought pudding cups.

Rosa made a face like she wanted one, and Teddy said, "You can have mine."

"You're so sweet," Rosa said.

"He's so straight," Alec whispered to Cory.

"Stop accusing him of being straight," Cory whispered back.

"You're the sweetest," Rosa said to Teddy. "But I have to go back to work. You enjoy it for me." She kissed Teddy on the cheek before she left.

Alec was still staring daggers at Cory until he reached for the sandwich Alec had made him. Then Alec smiled and said, "You don't have to. But next time save your appetite for me."

Cory's eyes widened, and Alec laughed.

"You'll get your chance this weekend," Alec said.

Cory was afraid to ask what he had in mind.

"We can go to Linden Beach tomorrow and stay over until Sunday. You and me and Teddy. Mom can't make it."

"I have a store to run," Cory said. That wasn't the real reason he didn't want to go.

"It's closed Sunday, and you can take Saturday off. It's only an hour and a half away if we don't take the scenic route or follow the rules of the road. As my mother likes to say, we are practically a seaside town."

"I can't..." Cory started to say.

"Are you afraid of water?" Alec asked him, noticing that there was something fishy about his refusal. He narrowed his eyes at Cory.

"No!" Cory said defensively.

"Oh, my God, you don't know how to swim," Alec realized.

Cory made a face.

"You'll pick it up in two seconds. Trust me," Alec assured him.

"You and Teddy can go..."

"Are you telling me you're going to disappoint your little brother?" Alec put his arm around Teddy, who looked at Cory questioningly.

"Are you using Teddy to guilt me?" Cory asked.

"Yes. Liza's store sells swim trunks, go get some. I already got some for Teddy. I wanted to be ready. I was just waiting for warmer weather, and you, I guess."

Teddy had been following their conversation avidly.

"Yes, we're going," Alec assured him. "Do you know how to swim?"

Teddy shook his head.

"Then I'll teach both of you," Alec said.

Happy to hear it, Teddy looked at Cory, who was horrified.

"I guess we're going," Cory had to say.

Early Saturday morning they got ready to go. Cory packed up some snacks while Teddy bustled around like a little bee. To keep him occupied, Alec showed him the route they would be taking on a map that was torn in a few places along the folds and taped.

"The GPS is more fun," Cory said.

"Is not," Alec claimed.

The old map reminded Cory of the cloth bound books in the den. Some of the covers were fraying with mangled spines. Inside, the pages were loose. Old, well worn things didn't get thrown away in the Benchley house. How many family trips to the beach did that map represent? Nothing could replace that. It made Cory feel a little ashamed for trying to skip out on going to the beach for the first time with Teddy. So what if he didn't know how to swim? Teddy didn't either. The brothers were going to learn together.

On the drive, Teddy got to hold the map. Alec would call out the name of a place they were passing through, and Cory would help Teddy find it on the map. It only served to amp up his excitement. They saw a big handmade sign that said Dunsky Family Reunion, and Cory read it for Teddy's benefit. In a field behind the sign, they saw a makeshift camp with tents and RV's spread out among other vehicles. About a dozen kids were hanging over the fence and they waved to them.

"What a big family," Cory said, a little sad that he could only give

Teddy a family of two.

"Cow family!" Teddy yelled as they passed a pasture with several cows.

Looking out the car window, Teddy took in the whole countryside. They read the signs and Teddy called out what he saw. His wide open eyes, eager for new sights, made Cory happy even if swimming lessons were in his future.

Their first view of the ocean was from a hill rising over the town of Linden Beach. The town clung to the coast while the ocean stretched out forever. Cory could see some sailboats and pointed them out to Teddy. Teddy was in awe of the view and a little frightened.

"It's big," he said. "Are we going there?" He pointed toward the horizon.

"Down there," Cory told him pointing at the beach. They could see people and colorful beach umbrellas. That didn't worry Teddy as much.

Driving down into the town, they lost sight of the ocean. Linden Beach was a nice town, not too big or fancy. It seemed like a modest vacation spot. There were a few high-rise apartment buildings and hotels closer to the beach. Smaller, older buildings were interspersed between them. Coming out onto the road leading to the beach, they saw the ocean again. The beach was hidden by vegetation, but the view in the distance was clear. They could see waves cresting, racing each other to the shore.

Now it was just a matter of finding a good parking spot, but Alec was passing up all the available parking spaces.

"Not good enough?" Cory asked.

"Metered parking. No way. We're going to be here all day."

They had to park further away from the beach, but they weren't the only ones. Other people were walking toward the beach, loaded down with chairs and beach umbrellas. Two girls went by with surfboards. When Teddy looked at them, Alec again claimed he was straight.

"He was looking at their surfboards," Cory told him.

"Sure he was."

The beach wasn't too crowded and they found a good spot easily. As they set up their things on the beach, Cory eyed that monstrosity called the ocean and then Alec.

"Promise not to embarrass me," Cory whispered.

"I promise to embarrass you," Alec said. "Now let's slather each other with suntan lotion."

Cory hoped he wasn't blushing as he turned away. "I'll be busy

making sure Teddy doesn't burn."

"Teddy is tiny. I have way more square footage to worry about," Alec told him.

"You're on your own."

It didn't take long to put lotion on Teddy. Cory was now preoccupied with not knowing how to swim, not thinking about putting suntan lotion on Alec, and not looking while Alec put suntan lotion on himself. He gasped when he felt Alec's lotion slicked hands on his shoulders.

"I had some left. Didn't want to waste it," Alec claimed as he smoothed it over Cory's shoulders and down his arms. "Want me to keep going?"

"If you do, I'll have to sit here for a while with a towel over my lap," Cory whispered.

Alec laughed.

"Can't have that. Plus, I'd probably have to join you," Alec said.

That was good to hear. Cory hated to be the only one getting worked up.

They couldn't keep Teddy waiting. He was already squirming, glaring at them to hurry up. Alec made him even more impatient by making him stand still for pictures. Finally, Cory took Teddy's hand and they went to the edge of the water. The ocean was a miracle to Teddy. He stared at it as if no matter how big it was, he could grab it and run away with it, like all that endless blue was a treasure he could stuff into his pocket.

The three of them stood side by side where the ocean lapped at their feet. Teddy looked down and wiggled his toes.

"Want to go in," Alec asked him.

A moment ago, Teddy had stared at the ocean with wonder. Now he looked at the water like it was a monster that would swallow him. Cory understood perfectly. He kind of felt the same way. In fact he had the urge to pick up Teddy and carry him away from all that scary water. But he knew that wasn't what Teddy wanted. And if Teddy went in the water, Cory was going too. He and Teddy were inseparable now. Cory took his hand more firmly and said, "We'll let Alec go in first and see how it goes."

Alec saluted them and walked in. When he was deep enough, he dived in. As he came up, Teddy stared at Alec like he was the bravest man he ever saw.

"Hey, it looks like fun," Cory said as they watched Alec splashing around.

"Let's do it. But not too far," Teddy said.

"OK," Cory agreed and tried not to let Teddy see that he was nervous.

It wasn't bad though. It was nice to feel the water surrounding him. Teddy was wide eyed as he looked down through the water at his feet. Alec came up to them, rising out of the water wet and smoldering. Cory expected to see steam coming off his unbelievably hot body.

"Ready to try swimming yet?" Alec asked.

Cory froze, but Alec was talking to Teddy. Teddy agreed to give it a go. Cory stayed close and watched carefully. First thing he noticed was that Teddy had complete trust in Alec, as did Cory. He wouldn't let just anyone teach his little brother to swim. Alec held Teddy's hands and told him to kick his feet. Keeping his head up, Teddy looked scared at first but then he laughed as his feet kicked and splashed. Once he had that down, Alec held him around the middle and told him to dog paddle and kick his feet.

Cory decided to try out swimming for himself and maybe save himself from the humiliation of Alec teaching him. He went deeper and tested out what it would take to keep himself from sinking.

"You want me to hold you up?" Alec said to him, grinning.

Cory just glared at him. He was already getting the hang of it, feeling the buoyancy of the water lift him. The ocean only needed a little help to keep him afloat. He did the breast stroke and improvised a sort of frog kick purely by instinct.

"It told you you would pick it up fast. Look at him go," Alec said to Teddy.

Cory still wasn't sure he was doing it right, but it seemed to him like the ocean was working with him, not against him.

"I want to try by myself like Cory," Teddy said.

"OK," Alec agreed, but he only moved his hands away a little, ready to catch him.

Cory stopped so he could watch. Teddy dogpaddled desperately, and Alec took hold of him again.

"That was good. Remember to kick your feet too," Alec reminded him.

"Again, again," Teddy said kicking his feet, excited by the feeling of swimming on his own.

"How do you do that one," Cory asked Alec and mimed the move he had seen.

"The freestyle. When you kick, picture flippers on your feet. Minimize splashing when your arm hits the water. Try for a fast, smooth entry. You know how that's done." Alec leered.

Cory gave him a warning look then he tried it out. It wasn't perfect, but it got the job done. Teddy insisted on trying it out too while Alec held him. His version was all splashing, no forward motion.

After practicing for a while, Cory got out with Teddy so Alec could swim further out on his own. Alec looked amazing as he cut through

the water like some gorgeous, blue eyed shark. Teddy clapped as he watched him.

Cory took a seat on the rise on the beach and let Teddy play where the waves splashed over the sand. He waited for Alec to come out of the water. There he was, wet and gorgeous. Water streaming down his body, Alec walked toward the shore. He came out onto the sand like a man who needed to be licked from head to toe. Cory had to banish that thought. Turning away from Alec as he lowered himself next to Cory, he watched Teddy playing on the wet sand smoothed by waves. Teddy was drawing shapes and watching the ocean wash them away. He tried to finish each picture before the next wave. Sometimes he clapped, sometimes he stomped his foot like a sore looser.

Cory dug his heels into the sand and kept his eyes averted from the tempting sight of the nearly naked Alec so close, wet and warm.

"The way you were teaching Teddy, is that how your parents taught you to swim?" Cory asked to distract himself from sexy thoughts.

"Actually I don't remember learning. But Ian and I were always trying to drown each other so I can hold my breath under water for a long time. It's a useful skill," Alec said with a wink. "I guess you never went to the beach as a kid."

"I only had one chance to learn to swim," Cory told him. "My foster parents took me on a trip when I was six. We stayed one night in a motel with a pool. In the morning, we were sitting poolside. I was kind of afraid of the water, but I saw some other kids splashing and playing in the pool, and it looked like fun. I wanted to learn to swim, but my foster mother, Grace, wasn't feeling well. My foster father went to get her something from the drugstore. Her brother was there. I don't remember why. He said the best way to teach me to swim was to throw me in the pool. Grace said no, but he picked me up and threw me in anyway. She jumped in and got me out. I had swallowed a lot of pool water. She cursed him out and he left. I didn't want to go into the water after that."

"Sorry," Alec said.

"I'm glad we came here," Cory reassured him. "Teddy is having a great time."

"And you?"

"Me too, despite your teaching methods," Cory said, remembering his teasing.

"At least I didn't throw you in."

"I can't see you doing that," Cory told him. Alec had waited until Teddy was more than ready to swim on his own before he would let him go. Even then he was always ready to hold him up again.

"Sink or swim, that's no choice to give a kid," Alec said.

Cory agreed. It sent a bad message. He liked Alec's approach. I'll

hold you, and I won't let go until I know you can hold your head above water. Cory wondered if that's how long Alec would stick around, until Teddy was settled and secure, and Alec didn't need to worry about him any more.

They only left the beach to eat lunch then came right back. Teddy couldn't get enough of it. In the evening, they stayed until it got too cool to swim. That's when they had dinner then made their away to the Sugarsand Hotel.

"This little hotel is owned by an old friend of Mom and Dad's. We'll get a friendly rate," Alec said as they walked up the steep path.

With two stories and only a dozen rooms, Sugarsand was one of the small establishments a short walk from the beach. Sand was tracked into the lobby through the main entrance. Otherwise the place was shabby but clean. Mr. Snyder, the owner, checked them in.

"I only have one room left. If you boys will share, it's yours," he said.

"We'll share," Alec decided for all of them.

"I'll bring in a cot for the little one," Mr. Snyder said.

The room was small and plain with two beds. Cory wasn't sure if he was glad or disappointed that there wasn't only one. The window faced the ocean, but even on the second floor, the view of the ocean was blocked by a taller building. Though Cory volunteered to take the cot Mr. Snyder brought in, Teddy looked at it kind of possessively. Cory let him have it. Teddy was happy that they were all sharing a room.

"Teddy likes a slumber party," Alec said.

They had packed Teddy's drawing supplies, and Alec set them up on a small, rickety table. Teddy got busy drawing the ocean, and Cory decided to join in.

"I want to draw too," he said and took up a crayon and a piece of paper.

"I thought you said you wanted to draw," Alec said as he looked over Cory's shoulder at what he had on paper.

"I am drawing," Cory insisted.

"Where?" Alec said. "This?" He pointed at Cory's paper. "Teddy, is this drawing?"

Teddy both shook his head and said no.

"I'm not done yet," Cory told them. The truth was, ever since he was a kid, people looked at his drawings with confusion. The rude ones asked, "What's that supposed to be?"

"So what is it supposed to be?" Alec asked him.

"It's a cow like those we saw when we were driving down here,"

Cory explained.

Teddy frowned over the drawing and looked at Cory skeptically. Otherwise, he had no comment.

Cory's drawing ability gave Alec an idea. "Let's play a game. We'll call it What's Cory Drawing?"

"Hey, that's not a game. That's just another way to make fun of me," Cory objected.

"Yes, it is. Now hurry up and draw something so we can make fun of you," Alec told him.

With a new piece of paper in front of him, Cory drew really fast. He could barely tell what it was himself. He wanted to make sure to challenge them.

"OK, that could be anything, literally anything," Alec complained.

"Just guess," Cory told him.

"A ball of yarn," Alec said.

"How...?" Cory started to ask. "Never mind. Teddy, your turn."

"A cow," Teddy said.

"It's not always going to be a cow. Where do you see legs?" Cory asked him.

"It's sitting down," Teddy said.

"Give us a clue," Alec demanded. "Is it a living thing?"

"No," Cory told him.

"A cow," Teddy said.

"Not a living thing means not a cow," Cory informed him.

Teddy shrugged.

"This game is even harder than I realized," Alec said.

"It's a car," Cory told them.

Alec rolled his eyes. "Teddy, show him how it's done. Draw a car."

"I can't right now. I'm drawing a boat," Teddy explained patiently.

Alec took a piece of paper for himself. He drew while Cory flipped channels on the old TV. When Alec turned the paper to show him his drawing, Cory expected to see a car. It was a sketch of Teddy drawing. Alec had gotten Teddy's look of intense concentration just right.

They showed it to Teddy. He pointed to himself and said, "Me?" He looked embarrassed.

"You two are such brothers," Alec said.

Cory couldn't think of a higher compliment.

Chapter 19

The next morning Cory was up first. Looking out the window, he frowned. The horizon was a sliver of orange and steely blue. It was just plain gray above.

Cory turned to look at Alec, who was still asleep, unbelievably fuckable and also noticeably hard under the thin sheet. He leaned over Alec and whispered in his ear, letting his lips brush his earlobe.

"Bad news. We don't have beach weather," Cory informed Alec.

Alec sat up, saw that Teddy was still sleeping and gave Cory a look of grievous injury for waking him. Cory pointed at his crotch then at the bathroom door, telling him where to take his morning wood. With a hopeful look on his face, Alec motioned for Cory to join him. Cory smugly shook his head. Alec's look turned murderous and Cory smirked.

Not long after, Teddy was up as well, a hundred percent alert as soon as he opened his eyes. Taking no notice of the clouds out the window, Teddy jumped up and down excitedly like he couldn't contain himself.

"Even if it rains, we won't be able to keep this one out of the water," Alec said.

It was cloudy, but it didn't rain so after breakfast they went to the beach. When they got there, the waves were way too big for inexperienced swimmers like Cory and Teddy. Teddy urged on the biggest waves and cheered when they crashed on shore.

They kept their clothes on and walked up and down the beach. A number of other people were doing the same thing. Teddy ran back and forth letting the waves chase him. After checking the weather on his phone, Alec said it was supposed to clear up in the afternoon.

They walked to the pier and stood there with other vacationers. They saw big boats in the distance, and Teddy waved to them. Close to lunchtime, they walked back into town to find a place to eat. That's when Cory noticed a yellow cab parked along the curb and stopped.

"Let's take one somewhere," Cory said.

"Where should we go?" Alec wondered.

"Anywhere."

"I know the place," Alec said. "It will take care of lunch too."

Alec gave the cab driver their destination and they climbed in.

"Have you been in a yellow cab before?" Alec asked Teddy as he sat between him and Cory.

Teddy nodded.

"But not with your big brother. That's why it's special," Alec said.

Teddy agreed and smiled. Cory put an arm around him.

After a twenty minute ride, the cab left them in front of Earl's Cliffside Grill. Other than the location, the most notable thing about the place was the cartoonish sea creatures on its sign, like they were serving up Disney characters for lunch. Otherwise, it was a plain, square building with several benches outside where people were eating. The place was set back from the cliff that gave it its name. The cliff overlooked a small cove where Cory could see a handful of people sitting on towels. Two women were having a lot of trouble setting up a beach umbrella. Though the weather was still overcast, it was starting to clear. The sea was already noticeably calmer.

Alec went inside Earl's to get the attention of the staff. He came out with menus and sat across from Cory and Teddy at one of the tables.

"A seafood grill?" Cory said. He hoped they had more than just seafood.

"You two will love their hush puppies. I guarantee it," Alec said.

"They are not actually puppies," Cory said to Teddy so there would be no confusion.

"They better not be. They are fried," Alec said.

After they discussed what they should have, Alec said, "And I'm having a beer. And you guys can have... the pleasure of watching me drink it."

"They make their own lime-cherry soda. We'll have that," Cory told him. It was the only thing on the menu he found appealing.

"Beer is no good," Teddy said, making a face.

"It's not for kids," Alec said.

"Makes me puke," Teddy said, startling Cory.

"What?" Cory asked.

"The mean man made me drink it," Teddy said. "I didn't want to, but he pinched my nose. I puked and he and Mom laughed."

Cory was speechless. He forced himself to smile at Teddy.

"That is mean. It's not good for kids to drink alcohol. Grown ups are not supposed to give alcohol to kids. It's not allowed," Cory told him while keeping his feelings in check. He felt sick and angry, but he didn't want to upset Teddy.

"I don't need to have it," Alec said. He looked like he had lost his appetite for beer. And Cory wasn't the only one holding back his feelings. Alec's eyes gleamed with suppressed fury while he gave Teddy a shaky smile.

While Alec gave their orders to the waiter, Cory watched Teddy carefully. He didn't seem upset, and Cory was relieved. Teddy cautiously tasted the soda when it arrived in extra tall glasses then

gave it a thumbs up. The hush puppies were a hit. The crispy breaded shrimp were deemed "pretty good" by Teddy. Cory didn't think they were too bad either. If they were chicken instead of shrimp, they would have been great.

As promised, the sky had cleared. The sun shone brightly as they walked along the cliff after lunch. The cliff was grassy with a rocky edge. It wasn't very high, just high enough to worry Cory and impress Teddy. Both he and Alec held Teddy's hands as they walked close to the edge. They went around then down a path to the small beach underneath the cliff. Only a few other people were there. An elderly couple helped each other walk into the water, then splashed water on each other before taking a dip. The two women who had been setting up the umbrella were still there. One of them was texting. The other one was asleep.

Cory warned Teddy that he had to wait a little bit before he went swimming. At the same time, Cory tried not to stare at Alec's chest as he raised his arms to pull off his t-shirt. His chest expanded as he stretched. Once the woman who was texting noticed Alec in his swim trunks, she stared at him openly. After a minute, she nudged her sleeping friend, but she refused to be woken up. Alec was a sight. Too bad Cory had to keep his eyes averted.

When Teddy was covered in sunscreen and playing on the edge of the water, Cory took the opportunity to talk to Alec about what he told them at lunch.

"Shouldn't he have been more upset about that man forcing him to drink beer until he threw up? Not that I want him to be upset," Cory said.

"I don't think he grew up expecting people to be all that nice to him," Alec said. Cory could see that he was still angry about what Teddy told them. "And also, that man isn't here and you are."

"I make everything better?" Cory asked skeptically, but Alec just nodded. "I don't think that's how it works," Cory said.

"With you looking out for him, Teddy is in a different world. All the bad stuff is in the past," Alec said and turned to look at him.

For a moment Cory was so captivated by his eyes, he forgot where he was and almost kissed him. He forced himself to look away and noticed the old map sticking out of the bag with their stuff.

"Why do you like old things like thrift store books and maps?" he asked to get his mind off everything he would do after kissing Alec.

"It doesn't suit me, does it?" Alec said. He lay back on the towel and folded his arms behind his head. "I'm definitely not an old fashioned guy. I think it's because I don't have anything that's real in my life so I

like things that are real, that have a history, that I can touch and hold."

"You have plenty. Your family..." Cory started to say.

"That's your hot-button issue. I know I have my family, but I need to find some meaning in my personal life."

"Right," Cory said, feeling the sting of his words. He didn't mean anything to Alec, of course. That was according to their agreement, but it still hurt to hear it spelled out like that. He was glad when Teddy ran back to them and jolted him out of his thoughts.

Teddy was excited as he opened his hand and showed them a seashell. It was white and purplish along the edge with a small chip.

"Nice one," Alec told him.

"Good job finding it," Cory said. "Do you want to swim now?" He was ready to go in himself. He wanted to get away from Alec.

For the rest of the day, Alec nudged him, sent him questioning looks, but Cory refused to acknowledge them. He mainly spoke to Teddy. He felt like he had no right to his anger, but it was there anyway, and he felt that it was building not subsiding. By the time they went back to the hotel to get their stuff before driving home, Cory was ready to have it out.

They left Teddy to draw in the hotel room and stepped out into the hallway. Alec stopped right outside the door, but Cory went as far as he dared while still keeping the door to their room in sight.

"What the hell is eating you?" Alec asked, thoroughly confused.

"What more do you want? Why the hell am I not good enough? I spent my whole life not being wanted. I'm kind of sick of it," Cory snapped. He closed his eyes, a little ashamed of his outburst.

When he opened his eyes, Cory saw that Alec looked taken aback and kind of mad.

"We did this on your terms," Alec said in a hushed voice.

Did he really believe that?

"My terms? These are not my terms. These were never my terms," Cory said, admitting that he lied, that he always wanted more.

"I know, and I knew it even when you said we would just be satisfying each other." Alec said it like he was admitting that he was guilty too. "That's why this was a mistake."

"I was a mistake," Cory said.

"It goes both ways. Neither one of us did this alone. You need a hero and that's not me. Ian and I used to toss an old half dollar to decide who would get to be the hero and who would get to be the villain. We both wanted to be the villain. The villain had more fun."

"So you're a big, bad man," Cory mocked him, but Alec only got even more serious.

"And you are being stupid. You have Teddy now. You can't afford to get involved with a guy like me. You're promising him that you'll always be there. I can't do that. I don't have it in me." Alec had leaned close to him, almost speaking in his ear.

"Didn't you come here because you didn't want an empty life?" Cory asked him, making a desperate plea.

"Don't read too much into that. You've been waiting all your life for someone to show you love and commitment, to help you build a family. I'm not that guy."

Cory only looked at him, hurt, disappointed, but with nothing to say. He was still angry, but he didn't want to fight. There was no point. Alec just didn't want him.

He let Alec go back to the room ahead of him while he stayed behind to pull himself together. As he looked at a framed print of an ocean scene hanging on the hallway wall, he pictured himself as one of Alec's paintings. He was a body forever contorted between pleasure and pain, trapped, faceless, only a smeared shadow of himself, the real him forgotten, long discarded.

*

As he left Cory standing there, Alec felt a tightness in his chest that would hardly let him breathe. If he had only told the truth, why did it hurt him so much to say it? Every word he said tore him up inside. He didn't even want to think about how Cory must feel. A stupid fight in a hotel hallway probably wasn't the best way to set Cory straight. Alec didn't even know what kind of damage he might have done. He hoped Cory wouldn't hate him.

Letting Cory think that he was just a pastime left Alec overwhelmed by sadness and regret. But it was better to disappoint him now than to hurt him later. He wasn't what Cory needed or Teddy either. He felt like he was an empty vessel. Cory and Teddy might be able to fill his life, but he had nothing to offer them in return except another abandonment.

Alec put on a happy face when he stepped back into the room so Teddy wouldn't know anything was wrong. Obviously Cory needed more time before he could put on an act. When he came back, he was pale and only managed a weak smile for Teddy. They got busy packing, and getting ready to leave. By the time they got in the car, Cory seemed more like himself.

As they left, Teddy looked eagerly back at the ocean. He clutched the seashell the same way he had clutched the yellow cab when Alec first saw him.

"We'll go again, I promise," Cory told him.

"It's not far. We'll go again soon," Alec said.

Cory shot him a sharp look for making promises.

Teddy seemed reassured, but he still glanced back as if making sure the ocean was still there.

Alec already felt a sense of nostalgia for their short trip to Linden Beach. He predicted that he would always look back at this time with longing, think of Cory happy with another man, and regret his decision even if it was the right one.

Chapter 20

After they came home, Cory was civil but cold to Alec. He couldn't help it. He wanted to act normal, but just seeing Alec stirred up so many mixed emotions. The best he could do was to shut them all down. Alec was the same way toward him. Teddy noticed, of course. He might not know what their fight was about, but he could tell they weren't getting along, and it worried him. Cory hated to see the anxious look on his face. He saw it again when he got home from work. He sat down next to Teddy on the couch and put his arm around him. He was such a little thing. He didn't deserve the burden of adult drama.

"I want to tell you something. Don't worry when Alec and I fight. We'll make up," Cory said and he believed it. He just had to get over his disappointment first. "And that goes for you and me too. If we ever fight, we'll always make up."

"Because you're my brother," Teddy said quietly.

"Yes, because I love you and I'll be your brother forever."

"I love you too," Teddy said and looked shy, but then he got back to what concerned him. "And Alec?"

"We'll have to see about Alec. He has to make his own decision."

"Make up with Alec," Teddy said, rushing him.

"I'm still too mad. Give me a chance to cool off. OK?"

Teddy agreed reluctantly. A little later he came up to him to ask, "Are you cool yet?"

"Not yet," Cory told him with a smile.

Teddy looked impatient but agreed to wait a little longer.

A few minutes later, Alec stood in the doorway of the living room. Cory had been looking at the brothers picture, reminding himself that it was just him and Teddy, just the two of them.

"I was ordered to make up with you," Alec said.

"And how do you plan on doing that?" Cory asked him.

"I've already agreed to be the bad guy," Alec said. "I was built for it."

"And I should look for my hero elsewhere," Cory said, bitterly. He didn't want anyone else. He only wanted this man, the one who didn't want him.

Alec took a different approach, more physical. He came up to Cory and tried to take his hand. The warning look Cory gave him made Alec back off.

"I just want you to see that this is for the best," Alec said, still standing close as if he wanted to seduce Cory into believing him.

Cory shook his head and walked away. "I'll take care of dinner," he

told Alec. He wanted to give himself something to do.

"Want me to help you?" Alec asked.

Cory turned back to him angrily. He let the look on his face be his answer.

A little later, Teddy came into the kitchen with an expectant look.

"Did you do it? Did you make up?" he said.

"Not yet," Cory told him.

Teddy didn't like that answer.

"We can't always let Alec have his way," Cory said. "We have to stand up to him."

Teddy frowned.

"Help me with dinner," Cory told him. Maybe both of them needed to stay occupied so they could stop thinking about Alec.

*

After a night of restless sleep, Alec was up too early. He grumbled as he shuffled down the hallway. Now he would have to face Cory and his angry look or worse, his hurt look. As he walked to the kitchen, he saw no sign of Cory. Teddy was in the kitchen though. He was frowning at a piece of paper. Going over, Alec saw that it was a note. "Went to Pine Hill" it said simply, signed with Cory's name. Knowing what that meant, Alec almost cursed but remembered just in time that Teddy was there. He was staring up at Alec questioningly.

"Pine Hill," he said to Alec.

He must have recognized those words and probably Cory's name too.

"It's nothing to worry about," Alec reassured him then got on the phone with his mom.

"I need you to come stay with Teddy. Cory went to Pine Hill. Shit! Hold on..." Alec said.

Teddy was already out the kitchen door. Alec called his name, but he was gone. He called to him several times as he ran after him.

"Teddy!" Alec yelled, rushing outside.

He got no answer, but he spotted him. Still in his pajamas, Teddy was running barefoot on the stone path that went to the back of the house, toward the hill. He was almost halfway down the path before Alec could catch up to him.

"What are you doing?" Alec asked, taking Teddy by the hand.

"Cory went to the hill," Teddy said.

"That doesn't mean you should run out of the house like that!" Alec said.

"Brothers go together," Teddy insisted. He was ready to just keep

going.

"You can't go after him in your pajamas and bare feet. Let's get dressed, and we'll go together," Alec told him. He was trying his best not to let on how scared he had been and still was.

Alec picked up Teddy and carried him back into the house. He got on the phone with his mom again and told her to meet them at the base of the hill. They got ready quickly and practically ran there. Mom drove up just as they arrived.

"I need you to stay with Teddy," Alec said as he shielded his eyes and looked up at the hill to try and spot Cory.

All three of them were looking up at the hill. Alec was hoping to see Cory so he would know which path to take. But it wasn't called Pine Hill for nothing. Blocking his view, the trees reached right up to the summit. At the very top, the hill was rocky and forbidding. Cory wasn't up there yet. Alec hoped he could get to him before he tried to climb over the rocks. Even before this challenging part of the climb, the ground was steep and it was easy to lose one's footing. The rocky part was the most dangerous. He didn't even want to think of Cory trying to climb it alone.

"I'm going up after him," Alec told his mom as he tied his sneakers more securely.

"Alec, honey, he isn't a twelve-year-old," she pointed out to him reasonably.

"I'm still going."

"OK. Have fun," she told him. Alec had a feeling she wanted to say "be careful" but she didn't want to scare Teddy.

"Me too," Teddy said trying to pull away from Mom and join Alec just as he was walking away.

Alec stopped to talk to him.

"Sorry. You're too little. When you're bigger, you can go. This time I'll go in your place, OK?" Alec told him and hurried off.

As he climbed, Alec reminded himself of the same thing his mother had said. Cory wasn't a kid. He wasn't stupid. But until Alec saw with his own eyes that he was OK, he couldn't stop being scared. It didn't help that he almost fell a few times in his rush to catch up to Cory. Once he was high enough, Alec called his name. He didn't get an answer, but he hoped Cory heard him.

When he was past the halfway mark, he spotted Cory. Seeing him, Alec didn't know if he wanted to laugh with relief or curse at him. He couldn't do either while he was out of breath. He just stood there and tried to catch his breath.

Cory was sitting down on a fallen log. He had stopped to wait for him. As Alec approached, he stood up, not looking happy to see him.

"What the hell are you doing?" Cory asked him.

"If I wasn't out of breath, I would have already asked you the same thing," Alec said. Cory had taken his time climbing. Alec had to push himself. That's why he was winded, not because he was out of shape.

"You didn't need to come after me," Cory claimed.

"Teddy came after you," Alec told him, angry as he remembered how he ran out of the house. "He's down there right now with Mom. He saw your note and almost had it figured out all by himself. What the hell were you thinking?"

"He's getting to be such a good reader," Cory said with a proud smile.

"Not the point! He was running after you in his pajamas!" Alec said. He again tasted the fear of seeing the little guy disappearing out the door. Maybe for the first time in his life, Alec understood why his mother spent his and Ian's childhood in a worried frenzy.

"So you're here for Teddy," Cory concluded.

"I'm here because you are an idiot!" Alec snapped at him.

"I'm going to the top. Leave, stay, go fuck yourself, your choice," Cory said and continued climbing up.

None of the choices Cory gave him appealed to Alec. He took the one Cory didn't give him. He followed.

They were still climbing through the tree covered part of the hill. The tree branches gave them something to hold onto, but the pine needles underfoot made them slip constantly. At one point Cory tumbled backwards and Alec caught him.

"I'm fine," Cory said and shook him off.

Alec didn't waste his breath trying to make him turn back. Being up here again reminded him of his own stubbornness when he climbed for the first time. Ian couldn't make him turn back. Cory wasn't any less stubborn than Alec. Now that they were here, they were going to the top. And they were doing it together whether Cory wanted to or not.

Reaching the rocky part, Alec told Cory to rest. Cory told him to shut up but still took a break. Alec looked at him. Cory was sweaty, scratched up, and determined. His anger at Alec was driving him but so was his strong will. Alec didn't know anyone who could make him feel so much. Wishing he could take Cory into his arms, Alec turned away. He focused on the next part of the climb. Getting Cory's attention, he pointed out the best way to go. Cory nodded. He might be stubborn, but he wasn't stupid. More than anything, Cory wanted to get back to Teddy in one piece.

They started to climb after Cory looked back to see if Alec was ready. Alec smiled to himself. He wasn't just tagging along. They were doing this together.

Alec let Cory go first, thinking that he might somehow be able to catch him if anything went wrong and he fell. As they went, he pointed out to Cory where to hold on. He remembered that the safe rocks were usually dark gray and the loose ones were pale. It was still a gamble. Difficult handholds and loose rocks endangered them both, but Alec only worried about Cory. Alec's nerves were on edge every time Cory came close to falling. While he focused on Cory, Alec lost his footing. He was left hanging by one arm. Cory looked back and froze then started to climb down. Alec found another handhold just in time.

"Stop!" he gasped. "I got it."

"Alec?" Cory said.

Alec could hear the fear in his voice. When he had his feet planted firmly on a narrow ledge, he looked up. He shouldn't have. Alec almost fell when he looked into Cory's beautiful eyes with all the naked emotion inside them. Cory could knock him down so easily with one look, one touch, one kiss. How did Alec ever manage to hold on?

"I'm OK," Alec reassured him.

Cory's look turned angry. "Be careful," he ordered Alec as they continued to climb.

It didn't get any easier after that. Alec had to tell Cory to pay attention to what he was doing instead of constantly checking to make sure Alec was OK. Of course, Alec was doing the same thing, but he wasn't about to take his own advice. They only managed the last part after testing out several handholds that gave way.

Once they reached the top, Alec collapsed in a heap. Cory was still standing, staring at that sliver of ocean that was visible in the distance. Other hills almost blocked it from sight, but there it was, bluer than the sky. Alec remembered seeing it for the first time. It was like a promise. It gave him hope at a sad time. He remembered Ian's arm over his shoulder as they stared into the distance and missed their dad.

Alec stood up to take in that view again. He tried to prepare himself for what it would bring back, the good and the bad. It all flooded back, and he let it pass through him like a powerful wave. He whispered, "Hey, Dad. I did it again."

Blinking away tears, he noticed that Cory was looking down around his feet.

"What are you doing now?"

"I'm looking for the perfect rock."

Alec didn't ask him about that. He wanted to get to the heart of this.

"Did I send you up here?" Alec wondered. He knew Cory wasn't a guy who acted on impulse except when it came to Alec.

"That ego," Cory said as he looked down toward the base of the hill. He was probably looking for Teddy down there, but the trees growing in that direction blocked his view.

"So you're bitchy and you climbed up here for no particular reason?" Alec said.

Cory only gave him a scowl in reply.

"Let's hear it. Let it out," Alec told him.

"You mean bitch at you? Get it off my chest?" Cory shook his head and wouldn't look at him. "I'm mad, but I'm not blaming you for anything. I offered myself, and you took what I offered. I'm just kicking myself for not being able to keep a cool head about it. I wasn't built for casual fucking. I just can't help always wanting more, wanting people to care about me. But that doesn't mean that I expect it."

"Of course I care about you," Alec had to say. He tried to pull on Cory's arm to make him look at him, but Cory wouldn't let him.

"I know you care. But I'm talking about, you know ... I guess I want someone to be in love with me." Cory now looked up but not at Alec. He was looking into the distance as he said, "Sometimes I think I'm doomed to always be on the outside of things like that."

Alec squeezed his eyes shut. That's how Cory felt and now Alec had confirmed it. Damn.

"You're wrong, and I'm sorry," Alec told him. "I knew I was playing with fire when we started this, but self-control really isn't my thing. This wasn't a coolheaded decision for me either. I couldn't help myself."

Cory turned to him with sad eyes. "And I used that. I went into it knowing I had feelings for you and that you couldn't return them."

"I didn't..." Alec started to say, but Cory interrupted.

"Let me talk. I wanted you, but I wanted you too much. So I offered myself to you for casual sex. But I like fucking you too much. I never want to stop."

"Can I talk now?"

"No. I know what you're going to say. You're not interested in anything more. You were up front about that, and I have only myself to blame." Cory was grim, ready to take all the responsibility.

"You can't speak for me," Alec said to him. "I'm going to have my say with or without your permission."

Cory sighed, resigning himself to it.

"You did know where I stood going into this, but you don't know where I stand now," Alec told him.

"What does that mean?" Cory looked confused.

"I've had enough meaningless sex to know the difference. Every time we fuck, I feel like you're tearing out my soul."

Cory was too stunned to speak.

"Do you know how many guys I've kicked out of bed?" Alec asked, snapping him out of it.

"I'm sure you've kicked out of bed tons of hotter guys than me," Cory said bitterly. He still didn't know that he was the one man Alec never wanted to kick out of bed.

"It wasn't hard," Alec told him. "Those guys were like me, looking for fun and nothing more. I've avoided serious involvements all this time because I've steered clear of guys like you."

"Like me?" Cory frowned, maybe thinking that he was being insulted.

"You haven't had enough experience, and I've had too much. You could never fool me by pretending to be an easy fuck. You have love in your eyes."

"I do not. Shut up!" Cory blushed. Sheepishly, he asked, "Then why did you...?"

"I could only resist you for so long. I'm not made of stone," Alec admitted.

"I still don't know what you're saying," Cory said.

"I can't stop no matter where this goes." Alec didn't know how else to say that Cory was everything he wanted and didn't want. Alec was helpless against him.

Cory could see his mixed feelings despite his words. "I don't want to be the reason you run off," he stated simply.

"I wouldn't do that to you, not when we have Teddy to think of," Alec assured him.

"Good to know," Cory said, still looking unsure.

Alec wished he could promise him more, but he was already feeling panicky about being tied down by his vague declaration.

"I have my perfect rock. We can head down now," Cory said.

"Just like that? I just told you that I can't resist you and you just..." Alec threw his arms up in frustration. He wasn't sure what he expected, maybe for Cory to melt into his arms.

"What do you want? You didn't exactly make a love confession," Cory told him dismissively and tried to walk past him.

Alec grabbed him and kissed him deep and hard. He stopped when they were both stiff and out of breath.

"That's as much of a love confession as I can make right now, but I still expect a reward," he told Cory, who smiled.

"Now who's asking for too much?" Cory said. He stepped away from him.

"I can't say more," Alec told him, feeling like he had already said too much. "Just because I'm too weak to stay away from you doesn't mean I won't be moving on one day. I'm not looking for a relationship, but I

can't keep myself from feeling the kinds of things that land people in relationships. That's why I was so harsh with you. I wanted to cool things down. I don't want to hurt you."

"Right now I'm just glad I'm more to you than a convenient fuck," Cory said.

"Look where we are." Alec motioned all around. "You are very inconvenient!"

A few times, going down seemed harder than going up. The vibe between them had improved though. Cory was more willing to take his hand though he brushed him off most of the time. The climb down went faster once they were on the forested part of the hill. Cory was now in a rush to get back to Teddy, and Alec had to slow him down.

Teddy waited at the bottom with Mom holding his hand. Cory ran to him and Alec followed. Cory kneeled in front of his little brother and gave him a big hug. He apologized to Mom, and she let him right off the hook.

"Were you worried?" Cory asked Teddy.

Teddy shook his head. He did seem more excited than worried. Cory reached into his pocket and brought out the small rock.

"We went to the top and saw the ocean. This is from the very top of the hill. It's for you," Cory said and offered him the rock.

Teddy looked at it like it came from the Moon. He held it reverently and smiled at Cory as if he was an astronaut.

"I went up too," Alec told him.

"What do you want? A medal?" his mother said. "You two mountain climbers take this child to breakfast," she ordered them.

"You were worried," Alec accused her, leaning in.

"I was not," she said and walked away, shaking her head and grumbling. "Anyone who wants a ride into town better hurry it up."

"Can you take him to breakfast?" Cory asked Alec. "I have to open the store."

"Are you kidding me?"

"No. Petersen is bringing back the circular saw and renting the sander. He can only rent one thing at a time because he can't afford more than one deposit. He'll be there any minute now. He has to drive for an hour to get here. I can't let him down."

Alec sighed in resignation. "Should we bring Cory breakfast?" he asked Teddy. "Or should we make him suffer?"

"Breakfast," Teddy said right away. What a good boy.

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That morning, Cory had been up early, not wanting to waste any

more time lying in bed, sleepless and miserable. He had stepped out on the back porch while the morning sun was still clearing the horizon. The mist still clung to the grass and made the woods hazy. As he looked around, Cory caught sight of Pine Hill. He stared at it, and it issued him a challenge. At first Cory refused and turned away to go make coffee. Inside his head, he heard a voice deriding him, "You can't climb one little hill, and you expect to get a man like Alec?" Cory was ready to give that voice the finger, but then he reconsidered. Maybe climbing up there would give him some perspective, a clearer view of things.

After the climb, Cory did see things more clearly. He knew how Alec felt, that he did feel something. Cory had desperately needed to hear that, but he felt bad when he saw Teddy and Miriam waiting at the bottom of the hill. The relieved look on Miriam's face told him that she had been worried. He hadn't meant to cause all that trouble. He was glad that he and Alec had talked though.

Since Cory had to go to work, scolding Teddy was postponed until breakfast. Alec and Teddy brought in some pancakes from Thompson's and they ate on the hardware store counter.

"Now we need to talk about what happened this morning," Alec said. He stared at Teddy until he realized he was the one in trouble. "You ran out of the house without permission. That's not allowed. It's dangerous."

"Cory..." Teddy started to say.

"Cory is a big boy. He can go where he likes. You can't," Alec said sternly.

"Maybe I should handle this," Cory said, asserting his role as the big brother.

"Fine," Alec said, backing down.

Before Cory could say anything, Teddy had his own grievance.

"You got me in trouble." Teddy pouted.

"You got you in trouble," Cory retorted. "You can't leave the house, or go anywhere, without permission. What were you thinking?"

"You went to the hill without me," Teddy said, furrowing his brow.

"Yes. If I go somewhere without you, you stay put and wait for me to come back. And I'll always come back. OK?" Cory took his hand.

"OK," Teddy said, still pouting.

"You worried Alec," Cory told him.

"Sorry, Alec," Teddy said sheepishly.

"Just don't do it again," Alec told him gruffly, but Cory could tell that he was melting inside at that puppy dog face Teddy was giving him.

Chapter 21

Though Cory thought he had reassured him plenty, that night Teddy wouldn't stay in bed. Cory had tucked him in and left after he was asleep. A little later, Cory was busy on Alec's laptop when he noticed Teddy peering at him from the kitchen door.

"Do you want a drink of water?" Cory asked him.

Teddy shook his head. Alec came up behind him and explained.

"He won't go to sleep because he's afraid you'll go on another adventure without him."

From the look on Teddy's face, Cory could tell that he was right.

"What if I sleep in your room tonight?" Cory asked.

"OK," Teddy agreed.

Cory was going to sleep pretty soon anyway so he got ready and walked him back to bed.

"I'll sleep here that way you can keep an eye on me," he said as they cleared Teddy's drawings from the other bed. "Do you snore?" Cory asked.

Teddy shook his head.

"We'll see," Cory said.

"You snore," Teddy said.

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do, but not as bad as Alec."

"Why am I always the worst?" Alec asked from the door.

Both Teddy and Cory shrugged. When the bed was cleared, Cory got under the covers. Alec was ready to leave so he went and kissed Teddy on the top of his head and then did the same to Cory. Teddy gave him one of his patented "you're crazy" looks.

Cory had already told Teddy a bedtime story, and it was tough coming up with another one. Searching for inspiration, Cory noticed the glowing night sky painted on the ceiling. For once Cory told a story from his imagination. In the story, two brothers named Cory and Teddy traveled through space in a cool spaceship. They got a distress call from Alec, who had been captured by aliens, and they saved him.

"Should Teddy and Cory let Alec travel through space with them?" Cory asked.

Teddy voted yes.

While Cory was telling Teddy about their next adventure, he saw that Teddy had fallen asleep. Corey stared up at the ceiling and thought about the other two brothers who had shared this room. As he looked over at Teddy's goofy, sleeping face, he wondered if this is

what it would have been like if he and Teddy grew up together, sleeping in the same room, doing everything together.

The next morning, Cory was leaving for work a little earlier than usual when Teddy ran after him down the hallway, already dressed.

"I'm going to open the store early for Mr. Gruber. He has a job on Berchville Road and needs a stump grinder." It seemed half the time people needed him to open early so they could drive to jobs miles away.

Teddy still didn't look happy to see Cory leaving.

"You want to come to the store with me?" Cory asked.

Teddy brightened instantly. "OK," he said.

Seeing Alec poke his disheveled, sleepy head out of his bedroom door, Cory asked him, "You are up too? Are you coming to the store with us?"

"No. But I'll bring you lunch," Alec told him.

When he and Teddy came home after work, Teddy found something new in the den. He came to get Cory so he could show him.

"It's you," Teddy said, pointing and smiling.

A sketchbook was propped up by the window. On it was a sketch of Cory, a flattering one too. Cory knew he didn't look that attractive. It was nice of Alec to make him look good.

"I want to do that," Teddy said, impressed with the sketch.

"I like the picture you drew of the two of us better," Cory told him.

"No. This one is much better," Teddy said, questioning Cory's judgment.

"But you aren't in this one," Cory told him.

Now Teddy understood. He marched out of the den in search of Alec. He found him in the kitchen, working on dinner.

"You drew it wrong," Teddy told him bluntly.

"What did I...?"

"You drew Cory wrong," Teddy said.

"Yeah, I'm not that good-looking," Cory said from behind Teddy.

"That's not it," Teddy disagreed then turned back to Alec. "You left me out," Teddy said, pouting.

"Aren't you possessive?" Alec accused him.

Teddy was confused by the word.

"Jealous," Alec told him to clarify.

Teddy turned to Cory for help.

"You're not jealous," Cory reassured him. "And even if you are, it's OK." Cory put his hand on top of his head.

Teddy turned his pouting face back to Alec.

"The brothers have united against me. I give up. I'll fix it," Alec said.

He left dinner and went to the den.

Teddy followed him and watched him like a hawk.

"You're gonna watch me?" Alec said.

"So you don't mess up again," Teddy said.

Alec looked over at Cory but got no help there. He let Teddy watch until the last part. That's when Alec blocked the sketch pad with his body. Since he was a big guy, that worked out pretty well. No matter how hard he tried, Teddy couldn't get a glimpse.

When he was done, Alec showed them the result. On either side of Cory, Alec had drawn Teddy's face and his own.

"You too!" Teddy said, peering at the sketch in awe. "It's good now." He looked at Alec with solemn approval then smiled adorably. He then ran out of the room to draw something of his own.

"Thank you for making him happy," Cory said to Alec.

"Anything for Teddy," Alec said before he went back to the kitchen.

In the sketch, Teddy was drawn looking serious but with a look of wonder in his eyes. After gazing at Teddy's face in the sketch, Cory couldn't take his eyes off Alec's face on the other side. Alec wasn't as kind drawing himself.

"You are better looking than that," Cory wanted to tell him, but mainly he was surprised Alec had added himself. It was so unexpected, but it completed the picture perfectly. Cory did his best to shut down every ridiculous hope it encouraged. Alec had done it for Teddy. It didn't mean anything. Then why the hell did it have to look so right?

*

Just before his bedtime, Teddy came into the den. Alec was just cleaning his brushes and glancing at that sketch of the three of them, wondering if his face belonged there, next to Cory's.

"I drew a picture of Cory too," Teddy said and showed him.

"It looks more like a hill?" Alec said.

"It's Cory climbing the hill," Teddy said.

"Hey, there he is. Nice job," Alec said, spotting a small figure on the side of the perfectly triangular hill with threes sticking out of it sideways. "Where am I?"

Teddy pointed at a tiny figure.

"Are you sure that's not an ant?"

"No. It's you," Teddy insisted.

Alec couldn't help worrying that the little guy might want to follow in his big brother's footsteps. "You know you can't go up there until we say it's OK, right?" he told Teddy.

"I know. I have to get bigger," Teddy said. "Cory and me are going

together."

"Can I come?" Alec asked.

"Yes!" Teddy said and smiled.

Alec smiled too, reminded of how possessive he could be of Cory. Cory wasn't just someone who came into Teddy's life. Cory belonged to him and no one could take him away. Smart kid. Teddy recognized how important Cory was to him right away. Not Alec. All he knew at first was that Cory wasn't just another body. From the beginning, he was more real to him than any man he had ever been with, but he didn't know why. Now every minute Alec was getting more wrapped up in him. Cory got under his skin then pierced his heart. From the start, Alec knew he was dangerous and he still let it happen. He closed his eyes and heard his own voice calling Cory's name. He had never wanted anyone so much. All the time he was aching for him, greedy and desperate for his touch.

While Teddy was getting ready for bed, Alec went in search of Cory. He found him in Teddy's room, clearing the drawings from the second bed, and pulling back the covers.

"You're going to sleep here again?" Alec said, disappointed.

"Eventually," Cory said and showed him a book he was going to read since it wasn't his bedtime for a while. "Just one more time. Tomorrow night I'll go back to sleeping in my own bed."

"How about instead of going back to sleeping in your bed, you come sleep in mine," Alec said with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

Before Cory could say anything, Teddy came in. Looking up at Alec, he said, "Tell us a bedtime story."

"The kind of bedtime story I want to tell Cory..." Alec started to say when Cory elbowed him in the ribs.

"Tell us about getting in trouble," Teddy said as he climbed under the covers.

"I can tell you all about that," Alec's mom said from the doorway. Seeing Teddy and Cory in the twin beds, she sighed. "This takes me back."

Alec agreed. "Having Cory in my bed does bring up all sorts of things."

Cory sat up, glaring at him. Mom took a swipe at Alec and told him to behave. The comment paid off though. Cory was blushing beautifully.

With Cory and Teddy tucked in, Alec felt restless. His mother found him aimlessly pacing the house and told him, "Stop prowling like a man-hungry tiger."

"You approve, don't you," Alec accused her. He could see a hopeful

gleam in her eyes.

"I don't even know what you're talking about," she claimed before going to bed.

She was so transparent. There was nothing she would like better than to see him settle down with a nice boy like Cory. With Teddy in the picture, he half expected his mother might march him down the aisle even if it took a shotgun to do it.

Alec sighed. He wanted to say a big sorry to everyone – Cory, Teddy, his mom. He was going to disappoint them all and maybe even himself.

As he leaned on the doorjamb of Cory's room, he measured the space with his eyes. He wanted to look at the room dispassionately, reject it as too small. Small or not, Alec couldn't help going in and falling into that bed as Cory's limbs wrapped around him. Feeling him breathing, moaning, writhing under him, he had to bury himself in him. It was where he belonged.

"What are you doing here?"

Alec looked around groggily, barely awake and a little confused about where he was. He saw that he was in Cory's room. Cory was in the doorway, and it was early morning.

"I guess I fell asleep. I must have missed you," Alec blurted out. The realization had only just come to him that he missed Cory and how much.

"So you decided to sleep in this cramped little room?" Cory said.

"Next best thing to sleeping with you."

"Since when do we sleep together? I mean in the same bed. How can you miss it?" Cory asked as he pulled a change of clothes from the dresser.

"I hardly ever slept with anyone much, in the same bed, I mean. I passed out next to a lot of guys, but that's not the same thing," Alec said, thinking back to bodies lying next to his that might have been miles away. While stretched out on his bed, he eyed Cory more keenly. "That doesn't mean I can't miss sleeping with someone. You know better than anyone how a person can miss something they never had. It's your own fault for invading my dreams. I thought I was safe coming back home to the middle of nowhere and then you walk in. There goes my peace and quiet, my safe dreams about anonymous bodies," Alec complained.

Cory turned to him with a frown. "If you want to push me away, maybe you shouldn't tell me you dream about me."

"I'm done pushing you away. It's too hard. A man could break his neck," Alec told him, sitting up.

"Now I'm completely won over." Cory rolled his eyes.

"Come over here and make out with me," Alec said, making a grab

for him. In such a small room, Cory was within easy reach.

"I'm getting ready for work." Cory didn't try to evade him, but he didn't let Alec pull him into bed either.

Alec ran his hands up his legs in pajama bottoms and over the curve of his ass. He felt his breath catch in his throat. His voice was husky as he tried to lure Cory into his own bed.

"I'll help you undress. Scrub you down in the shower. I promise to button all your buttons once I'm done with you." He would have continued to try and persuade him, but a hard, wet kiss sealed his mouth shut.

Alec moaned when Cory ended it too soon.

"Lie back down," Cory ordered him and locked the door. "This is what we have time for." He got upside down on the bed and let Alec free his cock while he did the same to him. Seeing it spring free, hard and ready, Alec used it to stifle the moan building inside him. Kneading Cory's ass, he brought his cock deeper inside him.

Positioned head to toe, they sucked in rhythm. Cory's eager sucking drove him crazy. Good thing he had Cory's beautiful cock to keep him busy. Alec licked it lovingly and sucked hard. He was going to give Cory what he wanted – a fast, thorough suck to keep him thinking about him all day and bring him to his bed at night.

Chapter 22

Alec had so many ways to drive him wild. Every touch of his tongue was beautiful torture as he toyed with the length of Cory's cock. When he went from teasing to hard sucking, it drove Cory out of his mind. Cory wanted to give him the same crazy feeling so he sucked for all he was worth. He wanted Alec to remember him, but then he just gave himself over to the sensation of loving Alec's cock.

He relived every second of it in the shower, while it was still fresh and real to him. Slumped against the bathroom wall, he squeezed out the last drops of come as he dreamily tasted himself on Alec's kiss. Why couldn't every morning be like this one?

When Cory got into the kitchen, he found that Miriam hadn't gone to work yet. She had coffee going and poured Cory a cup. Cory tried to dismiss every indecent thought of Alec from his mind.

"So you found something you like about this place," she said to him with a knowing smile as she handed him the cup.

Cory hoped he didn't have a deer caught in the headlights look. He sat next to her at the kitchen counter.

"Relax, I'm not going to meddle in what you and Alec have going on. I just don't want my son to end up some kind of recluse. And you've raised my hopes."

"Me?"

"Who else? There are only two other gay guys for miles. One of them is old and still in the closet. The other one might as well be, and neither one is even remotely attractive."

"You could have said because I'm a great guy," Cory said.

"I could have," she said and squeezed his hand. "You are every mother's dream. But do you think you can tame my Alec?"

"He doesn't need taming. He needs to figure out what he wants."

"And what do you want?"

"Alec," Cory said simply. In that moment he again felt just how much he wanted to be with him in every way. He also felt the pain of not knowing if he would be or if one day Alec would pack up and leave.

"It's just good to know that he isn't a hopeless case," Miriam said.

Cory took Teddy to work with him again. He gave him a measuring tape and now Teddy was measuring everything in sight. First he would measure then he would nod with approval. He jumped when the chime on the door rang.

Mr. Muldoon was in early. He was very old and always fixing something. Cory noticed that he often frowned over prices then put a lot of things back without buying them. He could guess that the old man didn't have much money. Mr. Muldoon came up to the counter and started off with a sigh.

"I'm fixing up this old cabinet that's been in my wife's family since the dinosaurs were around, the way she tells it anyway. It's a monster of a thing. Won't even fit through the door. There's this one part I can't manage without a band saw. Is there any way around that security deposit?" Mr. Muldoon asked.

The band saw was one of the tools with a higher deposit. After thinking it over, Cory said, "What about collateral?" That wasn't their official store policy, but Cory didn't want the old man to have to leave empty handed.

Mr. Muldoon scratched his chin as he thought it over.

"Hmm. I could let you have my wife," he said.

"We don't take wives as collateral," Cory told him.

"What about my dog? She's a good one," Mr. Muldoon said.

"We don't take dogs either."

"I'm just pulling your leg. I would never give you my dog. How about my wedding ring?" Mr. Muldoon held up his hand to show him his ring.

It was a thin, beat up circle of gold. Seeing it on his gnarled finger, Cory doubted that it would even come off.

"The dog, the dog," Teddy said, pulling on Cory's shirt.

"I told you I was just kidding about that," Mr. Muldoon reminded Teddy.

The pleading look on Teddy's face didn't go away.

"Is it a nice dog?" Cory asked.

Mr. Muldoon thought about it and looked over at Teddy before he answered.

"Her name is Cookie because she's a sweet, old thing. But you don't get to keep her," he told Teddy.

"Just bring back the saw in one piece and you'll have her back," Cory told him.

"I guess I'll bring old Cookie by the mayor's place," Mr. Muldoon said.

Cory typed up an agreement, improvising some of it and printed it up. Mr. Muldoon signed it while shaking his head.

"I'd rather you took the ring or the wife," he said.

Next to Cory, Teddy was brimming over with excitement.

Mr. Muldoon brought his dog to the house early the next morning. Alec wasn't up yet, but the rest of them came out to greet Mr.

Muldoon and his dog. Cookie was a large, black and white collie, and Teddy was beside himself when he saw her. Miriam was still in her robe with a cup of coffee in her hand.

"Poor Mr. Muldoon is never getting that dog back," she predicted.

That morning, Teddy had gotten up even earlier than usual, gotten dressed, then waited impatiently, looking out the window. Now he was running around with Cookie. It scared Cory that she was so big, but she seemed just as sweet as Mr. Muldoon said. The old man smiled and shook his head watching her play with Teddy. When he left, Cookie did whine a little. Teddy consoled her and gave her a hug.

That morning, Teddy didn't have any trouble letting Cory go to work without him. Cory wondered if he should be jealous of Cookie. Seeing how he looked at Teddy and Cookie, Alec offered to go mind the store in his place. Damn, that was sweet. Cory didn't take him up on it, but all day he smiled thinking of everyone who was waiting at home for him.

In the evening, Cory and Alec were walking through the field behind the house. Miriam was on the porch, sipping a Heineken. Teddy was playing with the dog, running with her through the tall grass. To the west, the clouds covered the sky in fluffy folds. They were already starting to glow a deep gold from the sun sinking toward the horizon. Every minute their color grew deeper, turning from gold to red. Alec pointed them out to Teddy, who tried to get the dog to take an interest. Cookie did bark at them, making Teddy laugh.

"I miss having a dog," Alec said as he saw how much fun Teddy was having with Cookie.

"No reason why you can't," Cory said.

"Not with the way I live," Alec told him.

"You are trying too hard to be a hopeless loner."

"And failing?" Alec finished for him. "If one day I decide that this life is not for me, I'll break everyone's heart including my own. I can't live with that."

"Maybe that means you won't bail on us, now or ever." Cory turned to him, looking for a sign. "You might not want to be my hero, but you can't seem to help it."

"And what do you think I can offer you?" Alec asked.

"Don't know. My feelings aren't about having something to gain. I just can't stop wanting you."

Alec closed his eyes.

"We're all looking for a home," Cory told him. In that way they were the same.

"Some of us might spend the rest of our lives looking for it," Alec said. His blue eyes were full of hopeless longing.

"What do you mean? This could be your home."

"Like those signs, If You Lived Here You Would Be Home Right Now?" Alec asked with a crooked smile.

"Yeah, like that."

"This place just isn't me, never was. I couldn't wait to leave and start my real life." Alec looked around like he wanted to see skyscrapers rise up around him.

"And how did that work out?" Cory asked him pointedly.

"It swallowed me up for a while then it spit me out," Alec admitted.

"You came here because you wanted a real life. What do you think I'm offering you?"

"But I have nothing to offer in return. I don't know a stable, loving relationship from a hole in the ground," Alec said.

"Maybe I can make you happy," Cory whispered. He wasn't sure if Alec heard him.

Alec was looking into the distance where the tops of the trees swallowed the sun as it turned the sky orange and red.

*

Alec looked from the vivid sunset to Cory. Cory's eyes shone with it, but he looked far away. Only a second ago, he had told Alec that he could make him happy. Now it was like he hadn't meant to say it. A stray thought had slipped out and reached Alec. What Alec noticed most was how lonely he looked, almost hopeless.

"If anyone could, it would be you," Alec told him because he had to give him something.

Cory turned to him with a hint of a smile. His eyes looked like they still held the sunset inside them and Alec kissed him.

Cory pulled away quickly and looked for Teddy. Of course Teddy was busy with the dog and hadn't seen a thing. Mom did though. She waved her beer glass at them.

At bedtime, Teddy asked, "Can I sleep on the porch with Cookie so she isn't scared all alone at night?" He was under the impression that Cookie would have to sleep outside. He was thrilled to find out that she could sleep in his room.

"She's an old dog. It wouldn't be right to leave her outside all alone," Alec told him.

Teddy agreed with this philosophy.

Alec put an old blanket on the floor of Teddy's room to make her comfortable. Curled up in bed that night, Teddy was a happy little boy.

"Are we going to have to get a dog?" Cory asked in a whisper as he

and Alec left Teddy's room.

Alec simply pointed at Teddy's adoring face as he looked over the edge of his bed at Cookie.

"He doesn't even look at you like that," Alec told Cory.

Later that night, Alec heard Cory heading to his room after checking on Teddy. Alec came out of the den. He let his eyes roam Cory's body. Slipping an arm around his waist, Alec gently steered him to his bedroom. When Cory stopped him, Alec was intensely disappointed.

Cory didn't explain, but a few minutes later he showed up in Alec's room with a smug look on his face. Ready to go to bed alone and miserable, Alec glowered at him.

It turned out that Cory had gone to leave a light on in his tiny room so if Teddy came by, he would see the note that said he was with Alec. He just couldn't let Teddy worry.

"You want me, you got me," Cory said before he came over and kissed Alec.

Cory yanked down Alec's pajama bottoms, sliding his hands over his ass. He pulled Alec close to him, interfering with Alec as he tried to get him out of his jeans. Busy trying to grope Alec everywhere, Cory wasn't cooperating.

Getting the condom and lube was another struggle. Cory was everywhere. Every part of him wanted contact with Alec. He only settled down when he felt Alec's lubed fingers at his hole. Now that he was being good, Alec positioned him over his lap. He rubbed his ass as he fingered him. He didn't stop until Cory decided it was enough and got up. Bending double on the edge of the bed, he buried his face in the mattress and gripped the sheets.

Alec sank into him, feeling that welcoming tightness that wouldn't let him rush. That was good. He wanted this fuck to last forever. Running his hands all over, he felt Cory shudder. Next he felt him push back, wanting more. Alec grabbed his hips and pushed in until he felt Cory tighten against him. His body was a beautiful battleground, wanting him, resisting him, while Cory always demanded more.

"Don't hold back," Cory told him, but Alec couldn't listen.

Cory's body was his master, and Alec obeyed it. He pushed with steady pressure that Cory's body asked for. He didn't let Cory buck against him, trying to take more than he was ready for. He was such a hungry thing. If he was anyone else, Alec would have given him what he asked for, but not Cory. Cory was going to enjoy every hard inch no matter how long it took to drive it all the way into him.

*

Cory hadn't meant to tease Alec when he went to his room. It just worked out that way. Now he wondered if Alec was making him pay for it.

Cory had panted, feeling the head of Alec's cock merely nudge his hole. He remembered too well how good it felt. Every part of him was dying for Alec, but he filled Cory with agonizing slowness. Cory's insides stretched to accommodate him and pulsed around him. That first push seemed to go on forever until Cory was a shaking mess. Alec gave one last shove to make sure he was all the way in then he leaned over for a kiss. Cory twisted around and moaned into his mouth. When Alec pulled back and thrust forward again, Cory nearly cried out. Having to be quiet while being fucked like that was hell. He felt like every thrust went deeper inside him and took him higher. Alec's name wanted to burst out of him. His tongue wanted to taste the sound, his lips to shape the name Alec. Come on, it would feel so good to say it, say his name. It felt like a battle, Alec giving him an amazing fuck, trying to draw out his name, and Cory giving all he had just not to say it.

Arching, throwing his head back, Cory couldn't take it any more. Stopping Alec he turned over and wrapped his legs around Alec's back to bring him down to him and back inside him. As Alec plunged in, his eyes fastened on Cory's. Cory saw a desperate need there. Cory moved letting him know how he wanted it – harder of course. Smiling, Alec indulged him. His powerful thrusts shook Cory to the bone, pushed him to the brink. Thank God Alec was close too. Cory wanted him to come, and he wanted to come with him. Their bodies slammed together, driving them into each other not just physically. United, they came together, climaxing wildly, insanely ecstatic for an endless moment. Cory said his name without thinking just before Alec's lips were on his. He wasn't sure Alec even noticed. When Alec stopped kissing him, Cory said his name again. He said it breathlessly, like a man coming up for air.

"What?" Alec said.

"I was just practicing saying your name."

"That's not how you say my name. You have to scream it," Alec told him, the greedy bastard.

"Make me," Cory dared him, though they both knew that wasn't going to happen.

"I love you," Alec said.

That was playing dirty. Cory glared at him.

"Keep looking at me like that. That look means 'Fuck me like an animal,' right?" Alec said with an evil leer.

"Yes," Cory said. What else could he say?

The next time was slower. Alec kissed him everywhere until Cory pushed him off and returned the favor. Cory had Alec on his back. After he had tasted every inch of him, Cory straddled Alec and rode him. Alec took over at the end because he liked to show off. He claimed it was to give Cory a rest. Yes, it was very restful to be pounded by an insatiable beast with a big cock.

Alec was relentless. Cory knew they were going to be coming hard. He gasped Alec's name shamelessly now, begging, demanding, cursing him under his breath for giving him more pleasure than he could handle. Cory didn't want to come yet, not without Alec, but he was driven to it. Alec plowed him so hard, Cory couldn't help it. He shook under all that power, all that hard muscle slamming into him. He came and then watched Alec come right after. His neck corded, every muscle turned to steel. God, he was beautiful as sweat dripped off him, and he looked deep into Cory's eyes.

"I don't want to stop," he said, breathlessly then he dropped into Cory's arms.

They were a sweat-drenched mess of entwined limbs. As Cory wrapped his arms around him tighter, Alec murmured loving nonsense in his ear.

After he calmed down, Alec had something different to say.

"Remember, admitting my feelings and changing my nature aren't the same thing," Alec said.

Cory ran his hand through his hair. He didn't care about Alec's warnings right then. He just wanted to hold him while the words I love you were still ringing in his ears.

Cory woke up in his own room. The open window let in a fresh green scent that made Cory smile. He could never remember waking up so happy. Now Cory had so much to look forward to. Teddy's running feet on the hallway floor were his signal to get up. Next he heard Cookie barking. He wondered if Alec might wake up with all that noise, but after that workout last night, it wasn't likely. Cory was feeling the effects himself. His body ached so sweetly, every twinge a reminder of Alec driving him over the brink and saying he loved him.

Chapter 23

All day Alec had been bouncing between elation and fear. He loved Cory. Damn. How would he defend himself against him now? He had pretty much admitted defeat. Just because Cory took it in stride didn't mean he wasn't going to use it against him. Then Alec caught himself smiling. He loved someone. He loved Cory.

When his mom dropped in for lunch, Alec did his best to keep that sneaky smile off his face. Mom sat on the porch to eat her ham sandwich. Teddy was out in the field with Cookie, enjoying his last day with her. When his mom asked Alec to sit and join her, he was instantly on high alert.

"Sorry, I'm afraid I have some important..."

"Oh, sit down. You're just delaying the inevitable," she told him then added, "In more ways than one."

Alec dropped into the chair, already not liking this conversation.

"You and Cory. Don't tell me you're just playing around with that sweet boy," she said.

"Are you asking me what my intentions are? You're supposed to ask him," Alec grumbled.

"Cory is an open book. He'd marry you in the blink of an eye and make you the happiest man on earth," she predicted.

"But this isn't me," Alec told her seriously.

"If you're living it, it must be you," she said reasonably.

"I'm unreliable, Mom. I'm afraid I'll hurt them."

"Then why haven't you left already?" she asked though he knew she didn't want him to go.

"Because I can't. I can hardly stand to think about leaving," Alec admitted.

His mom smiled at him kindly.

"Because they are your life. You found what you were looking for. Now just accept it."

"And you're not just saying that because you want me here, feeding you?" Alec asked her.

"Of course I am," she admitted easily. "I want you here and Teddy and Cory. So indulge your mother. You know I always get my way."

"Oh, God. Where are you hiding the shotgun?" he pretended to look under the wicker chairs.

"Don't worry. I won't try to arrange your life to my liking. Just make sure you don't miss your chance to be truly happy."

She hugged him, kissed his cheek then wiped off the lipstick.

When he came from work, Cory told them that Mr. Muldoon returned the saw but let Cookie stay over until the next day. They were all a little worried about Teddy's reaction when the time came to give her back.

The next morning, Mr. Muldoon was there to pick up his dog. Mom was at work, but Alec was up. He made sure to be there in case Teddy was sad to let Cookie go.

"I was expecting her to run back to me as soon as she got the chance. I guess she likes it here," Mr. Muldoon said. Cookie was very happy to see him.

"I think she likes Teddy," Cory said as he petted her.

"I'm sorry to separate them, but I'm kind of used to having her around," Mr. Muldoon said and winked at Teddy.

Teddy didn't seem upset as Cookie climbed in the front of the truck with Mr. Muldoon. He waved at them as the old truck trundled away.

"You're not sad to see her go?" Cory asked Teddy.

Teddy did look a little bit sad but not the way they expected.

"She's not ours," Teddy said. "Mr. Muldoon needs her, and I have you."

"That's a compliment," Alec said when Cory smiled uncertainly. "When I was his age, I would have traded my brother for a dog so fast. And we already had two dogs."

Cory turned to Teddy and said, "Thank you for not trading me in for a dog."

"You're welcome," Teddy said solemnly.

"He's so sweet," Alec said as he watched Teddy run off to draw. He was probably going to draw Cookie again. "I never had that kind of relationship with my brother. Ian and I took each other for granted. You guys know what you have and what it's worth."

Alec eyed Cory who was lost in a reverie.

"I feel greedy wanting more now that I have Teddy," Cory said in a low voice. "But I want to have a beat up old ring like Mr. Muldoon, one that looks like it's been there a thousand years and isn't ever coming off."

"So you can offer it as collateral for a band saw. You're too young to want to get tied down for life." It was just like what Mom had told him. Cory knew what he wanted. He even bragged about it.

"Just because you need to meditate on your life doesn't mean everybody is as clueless as you," Cory said, smug about his certainty.

"You just have a one track mind. You were denied a real family when you were a kid, and now you are fixated on that."

"In other words, I know what I want and you are clueless," Cory shot back at him.

Alec tried to stare him down but got lost in those beautiful, hazel

eyes.

"I don't know. I'm starting to think I might be the man to put that ring on your finger," Alec told him.

Cory was startled by his words. He looked at Alec like he doubted his sanity. He eyed Alec suspiciously all morning until he went to work.

Alec didn't blame him. He didn't know if he could trust his own words either. All he knew was that if he left Cory, he would be walking away from the only man he loved. For Alec leaving was becoming impossible. He had planned it, but even if it was only Teddy, he wouldn't be able to leave. Now there was Cory. Just as Cory and Teddy were inseparable, Alec felt he was inseparable from them too. He had to watch over them.

Having those two come into his life wasn't something he could have imagined, much less what it would mean to him. When trying to figure out his life, he had wondered if he should try to have a real, committed relationship. But this went beyond that. This was total commitment in an instant, and Alec had made it without even realizing it, maybe the moment he set eyes on Teddy and later Cory. If he could only follow through.

That night, Alec tried to remove the doubt he saw in Cory's eyes. They were entwined together in Alec's bed. They were sleepy, but they didn't want to drift off yet. It felt too good to be in each other's arms.

"I'd rather break my legs than leave you," Alec said. His lips brushed Cory's hair as he lay on Alec's chest.

"Are those the only options? If you have two good legs, you'll leave?" Cory asked, raising his head to stare at him balefully.

"Are you going to take everything I say the wrong way?"

"Probably," Cory said, always ready and willing to give him a hard time. "I'm trying to piece together who you are with what you're saying. It's not a good fit."

"I'm having trouble with that myself. But do you really doubt that I love you and want to make you happy?"

"I didn't say that. But I can't know what's in your heart until you prove it."

"Isn't there any proof in saying it? I don't throw those words around without meaning them. I've never said 'I love you' to any man before you," Alec told him.

"That's nice, I guess," Cory said and allowed himself a small smile.

"So I guess it makes you a little happy to hear that I love you."

Cory looked down shyly. "Yes," he admitted.

Alec laughed and Cory looked up at him, chagrinned.

"Can we have a truce?" Alec asked him.

"Sure," Cory said with a shrug. "Look at you, how can I be mad at that?"

"That?" Alec objected.

"Just be glad you have all this going for you." Cory pointed up and down his body. "Or I would have kicked you to the curb by now."

Alec kissed him. He couldn't remember ever wanting to kiss anyone so much. He couldn't get enough of him. Cory was changing him all the time, or maybe he was just uncovering his secret longings and needs.

"I feel more alive with you," Alec told him. "Like you're waking up some dormant part of me."

"Your dick?" Cory said, stroking it lightly.

"I was being deep."

"It doesn't look good on you."

"Don't you want me to grow as a person?" Alec asked.

"Not really. You're fine the way you are," Cory said and kissed him.

Alec grinned at him. "You like me."

"I didn't say that. I just don't want to see your version of self-improvement," Cory said as he dodged his kiss but not his groping hands. He pressed himself against Alec, his naked body hot, his cock getting hard again. "You must be doing something right. I didn't know anyone could make me feel this way. I love you so much that..." Cory stopped and frowned. He had made a confession he didn't mean to make. Blushing, Cory drew back.

"You didn't mean to say that, did you?" Alec said with a smile that only just curled his lips.

"It kind of just popped out," Cory admitted.

"It's out now. You can't take it back," Alec teased him. "And you're late coming out with that. I already told you I loved you."

"You want extra credit? A gold star?" Cory asked, looking put out.

"No. I want you. Give me," Alec demanded, dragging Cory down to him for a deep, long kiss.

After coming out of a dream of Cory's tight, sexy body, Alec opened his eyes to Cory in his bed, lit by early morning light. No more dreaming about faceless bodies. His dream was a living being, a real man who was within reach. Alec kissed his shoulder and smiled remembering how Cory had blurted out that he loved him. Now he was wrapping his arms around Alec before he was even awake. But as soon as he did, his alarm rang.

"Why so early?" Alec grumbled seeing Cory jump out of bed to get dressed.

"So I can sneak out of here," Cory told him.

Alec was going to talk him into staying when they both heard little running feet in the hallway. Alec slumped back, defeated.

Alec walked to the kitchen bleary eyed. When he saw his mom standing by the coffee maker, grinning at him, he knew he was up too early.

"Is the shotgun under the counter?" Alec asked her.

"What are you so afraid of?" she asked, pouring him a cup of coffee.

"You and a shotgun," he told her.

"You're afraid of what you want most, you funny kid. And you used to be so fearless," she said.

"I didn't have as much to lose. And you should be telling me to slow down," Alec told her.

"It's not up to me. You named Teddy and now you're teaching him to paint just like your dad taught you. You going to tell me you don't love that kid? That you don't love Cory?"

"Love isn't the same as turning your life upside down," Alec said with a sigh.

"Yes, it is!" she contradicted him "That's exactly what it is."

Not having a lot of experience with love, Alec still knew she was right. His own feelings for Cory told him that love turns you world upside down, turns you inside out, and leaves you helpless. And just as everyone was ganging up on him too. Cory was telling him he loved him, melting his heart, making him want him even more. Now his mom was demanding unconditional surrender.

"Think about how much you can give Teddy and how much he needs you. And think of how much it will mean to Cory to know that you want to spend your life with him, that you and him and Teddy would be a family. Doesn't the thought of them being your family make you happy? I know it makes me happy," she said.

"It does," Alec had to admit. The idea had put a smile on his face and given him a bright, joyous feeling. He could give Cory everything, fulfill all his dreams.

Chapter 24

As Teddy was having his lesson with Alec, Cory watched them through the kitchen window. Teddy raised his eyes from the page to Alec, and gave him a funny look. Alec must have said something weird. Cory had taken the day off to go with Miriam to talk to a lawyer she hired for him. Mr. Reynolds was very optimistic that Cory would be given at least temporary custody of Teddy. It helped to have Miriam on his side. She got them to place Teddy here, but Cory worried that she might not be able to help him get custody.

"I will pull out all the stops, honey. But don't worry about being separated from Teddy. You are both here. You're together. One way or the other, I'll make sure you stay together," she promised him.

Cory knew that he might have to settle for staying with Teddy but not having custody of him. As Miriam said, the most important thing was for them not to be separated.

"You have a good chance. Teddy is talking because of you. Janice, Arthur and Monica. all agree that you've been great for Teddy. Latisha is talking you up to everybody," Miriam said.

Cory was confused by all the names. Except for Monica, Cory didn't know who she was talking about. Then he realized she meant Teddy's case worker, Mrs. Martinez, Dr. Wheeler, and his old case worker, Mrs. Fitzgerald. It was just like Miriam to get on a first name basis with everyone, even a woman Cory had known all of his life as Mrs. Fitzgerald.

"Latisha can't say enough good things about you, how good you were, how you never gave anybody any trouble. She's getting all your foster parents to write letters on your behalf."

"I guess being good is finally paying off," Cory said. It might get him the family he always wanted.

Talking to Mr. Reynolds, Cory had gotten the same answer. He couldn't expect permanent custody yet, but it would happen eventually. No record could be found of Teddy's birth. That was just like in Cory's case. It was likely that neither one of them was born in a hospital. The courts just wanted to give it more time even if it was unlikely any other relatives could be found. Mr. Reynolds told him temporary custody was a sure thing. Everything was in his favor, most of all the progress Teddy had made since he was abandoned. Everyone gave Cory the credit. Cory knew that Alec and Miriam were the first to reach Teddy and make him open up. It was all of them together, giving him a family and a home, that had helped him blossom.

Seeing how patiently Alec taught Teddy confirmed it. Sitting at the

table outside, Teddy was concentrating hard, sounding out unfamiliar words then looking at Alec to see if he got it right. As Cory watched them, Alec made Teddy laugh. The sight of it filled Cory's heart with love for both of them.

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Alec noticed that Cory was distracted all day after his meeting with the lawyer. At dinner, he picked at his food absently until Teddy told him to eat. That did it. Cory ate everything and showed him his clean plate. Teddy nodded with approval.

Looking at them, Alec knew nothing could separate them. But as the date for the custody hearing approached, Alec could see how it weighed on Cory. He did his best to take his mind off it, with sex of course. Then one day he decided to pull out all the stops and popped the question.

"I think we should get married. Say yes," Alec said just as Cory was drying his hands after doing the dishes.

"Are you crazy?"

"That's not a yes. Think about it. Soon you'll have custody of Teddy. You'll be married to me. You'll have everything you want. My mother would love to give me away," Alec said with a wry look on his face.

"I bet she would," Cory said.

"She would be happy to hold the shotgun too."

"So this would be a shotgun wedding?" Cory said just to be difficult.

"You know this is the right place for you and for Teddy. He loves it here. It's ideal for that dog you'll be getting him. You're managing the hell out of Mom's store. And you'll have access to this 24/7." Alec pointed to himself.

"So would this be a marriage of convenience?"

"What? No! I was trying to talk you into it by pointing out the advantages. I'm terrified you'll say no," Alec said desperately. Why wasn't this working?

"I would expect you to be terrified that I'll say yes," Cory said.

"That too," Alec said honestly.

"Ask me when you're sure which answer you are more afraid of," Cory told him.

"I am sure I want to marry you," Alec insisted. "That doesn't mean I'm not scared to death. But I know it's what I want. I've figured it out. This is the life I'm supposed to live. You're the one I've been looking for."

"So you would be happy if I said yes?" Cory said, still doubting him.

"Say it, and you'll find out," Alec said, but Cory didn't take up the challenge. Alec tried a different approach. "Coming here, I was trying

to take a step back in time, or maybe even stop time for a while until I figured things out. But time doesn't stop or move backward, it only moves forward. That's not a bad thing if it brings us together. That's what I couldn't figure out at first."

"First you are slow on the uptake. Now you're trying to move too fast. I know you love Teddy and you want us to stay here. I know you want to give him a home just like I do, but..."

Alec had to interrupt him. "So you know that I love Teddy, but you don't know that I love you so much that I want to marry you?"

"Teddy is easy to love."

"So are you."

"I'm not questioning your feelings just your speed. Slow down."

"I'm a high performance vehicle. Don't put me in the slow lane," Alec protested as Cory kissed him then walked away.

Alec hung his head and groaned. Knowing that wasn't Cory's final answer, Alec didn't feel too crushed. It made sense for Cory to doubt him. Even if he believed Alec loved him with all his heart, marriage was a big deal. The one man you love always in your bed. The thought made Alec smile. That's how he knew he was ready despite the fear.

He had to wonder if there was more than his doubts about Alec that made Cory hesitate. Had anyone ever shown Cory this kind of love and devotion? Whether Cory ever got it or not, he certainly had it in him to give. He could already see that Teddy was going to grow up to be a happy boy with his big brother watching out for him. And Cory had loved Alec before he knew his love was returned. How painful that must have been. Alec kicked himself for being an asshole. Cory deserved to be happy and to have every proof of love Alec could give him. Now he just had to convince Cory that he and his proposal were for real.

On the day of the custody hearing, even Alec was nervous. Standing in front of the judge in his new suit, Cory stood very straight and looked very serious and mature. He showed no signs of nervousness that Alec had seen in him every time he dealt with anyone with even a little bit of power over his and Teddy's lives. It was as if Cory had willed himself to be the perfect image of a strong, responsible, upstanding big brother. All the testimonials didn't hurt. Everyone was singing his praises.

Cory was given temporary custody of Teddy, and that was now officially his name. It would stay that way unless someone dug up a birth certificate, which hadn't happened yet. The lawyer said once they were sure that no one else had a stronger claim, Cory would be

given permanent custody. Alec had no doubt it would happen. No one could have a stronger claim on Teddy. They were brothers at heart, not just because they shared some DNA.

Outside the courtroom, Teddy ran into Cory's arms. Cory lifted him high then hugged him tightly and didn't cry. That crazy willpower of his. Alec had to wipe away a few tears, and Mom was bawling her eyes out. It was a happy day.

Cory only started shaking when Alec finally took him in his arms at the end of the day. They were home. Teddy was in bed, and Cory was exhausted.

"I was such a mess inside," Cory said.

"It didn't show. You were amazing," Alec said, squeezing him tightly.

"I want permanent custody."

"Slow down," Alec told him.

"That's what I told you."

"And I obeyed. But I still want to marry you," Alec reaffirmed.

"That's not obeying."

"Maybe I don't know how to obey."

Cory pulled away and looked at him. "Are you any different than when you came here?"

Alec thought about it.

"Not really. I guess I wasn't looking for a transformation. I was just looking for you. Since I never ran into you in any bar or club, or passed out in my lap at some party, I had to come here."

Cory gave him a disbelieving look and Alec grinned.

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It was a cool evening. The sky to the west was filled with wispy clouds that caught the ruddy colors of the sunset. It was still light out, and the wind was soft, carrying the fresh scent of the wildflowers. Alec and Cory were sitting in the wicker chairs on the back porch. Looking over at Alec's long legs in ripped jeans and his perfect chest in a paint-splattered t-shirt, Cory smiled. That man with the amazing body was his. Cory would climb into his bed tonight, and they would love each other and wake up together. Cory had never before looked forward to the coming of nighttime like this. The nights had a sweetness and joy that Cory had never known. Never before had good things come in a flood like this. They were always carefully rationed. Cory couldn't believe how full his life was.

As Cory turned his eyes to Teddy, he saw him peer at a big, green grasshopper that had landed on top of the porch railing. Delight and

curiosity mixed in his eyes.

In the next instant, Cory's view was blocked as Alec swooped in for a kiss. Cory looked over at Teddy to see if he saw that, but he wasn't paying any attention to them. He was at his table, completely absorbed in trying to draw the grasshopper. Alec sighed seeing him like that. He then pushed his luck and kissed Cory again.

"Why are you kissing?" Teddy asked.

"I got this," Alec said before Cory could answer. "Cory and I love each other, and we want to be together forever."

"Me too," Teddy said, and Cory remembered that those were the first words he ever heard him say.

"OK. Then all three of us will be together forever," Alec said.

"Alec is my boyfriend," Cory told Teddy to make things clearer.

"Alec?" Teddy tilted his head and looked at Alec critically.

"Alec is the only one for me," Cory explained, making Alec smile. But Cory wasn't done. "He's the only guy around here who likes guys so he's the only one who can be my boyfriend."

"What are you doing to me?" Alec asked.

"Serves you right. You dragged your feet too long," Cory told him.

Alec folded his arms and slumped in the chair as Teddy went back to drawing.

"Are you sulking?" Cory asked him.

"Only one," Alec grumbled.

"Come on. You're the perfect guy. How could I not love you?" Cory said.

"But I have this shitty personality," Alec protested.

"No, you don't. You're wonderful. You were just too stupid to realize we were meant to be together."

"You didn't know either."

"I knew in my heart," Cory claimed.

"Then I knew in my heart too. So are you going to marry me or do you want to keep making me suffer?"

"Both," Cory said with a wicked grin.

"Couldn't you run into my arms and shout, 'Yes, yes, yes'?"

"Couldn't you get on one knee? And maybe change your shirt?" Cory pointed to his paint smudged t-shirt.

"Fine. Wait here."

Alec went into the house and came back twenty minutes later looking even worse than when he went in. He was disheveled and his sleeve was ripped. Passing up Cory, he went over to Teddy.

"What if Cory and I got married? Would that be OK?" Alec asked.

Teddy tilted his head and thought hard.

"What are you doing now?" Cory asked Alec.

"Talking to the man in charge," Alec said then he turned back to

Teddy. "Then you would be my little brother-in-law."

"Brother-in-law?" Teddy said, going wide-eyed.

"Alec would be in our family and Miriam too," Cory told him.

"We would have a big family? Like the people at the reunion?" Teddy said.

"Yes. Exactly," Alec said, before Cory could say something more reasonable. He was desperate for Teddy's approval. "So can I marry Cory?"

"Is it forever?" Teddy asked.

"It's forever," Cory and Alec told him in unison.

After a thoughtful pause, Teddy said, "OK."

"Here goes," Alec said and got on one knee in front of Cory. He took two plain silver rings out of his pocket and held them out to Cory.

"I got these from a yard sale when I was in high school. They were cheap, tarnished, and I kind of forgot all about them. I had to turn the whole house upside down to find them. Ripped my sleeve on a nail in the basement. I did polish them up. I hope they fit," Alec said.

Cory waited for the rest, but Alec just kneeled there, offering him the rings.

"Long story short, you forgot the proposal," Cory said and sighed.

Alec leaned closer. He spoke in a hushed, reverent tone.

"You're my destiny. You're my life, and I want to be with you forever. I love you. I want to marry you more than anything. Please say yes."

Cory fell into his arms.

"Yes," he whispered in his ear, his throat tight, tears in his eyes. "Now give me one of those rings."

He took the ring and slipped it on Alec's finger. Looking into his eyes, he felt Alec take his hand and put the other ring on his finger. Alec looked so happy. Cory laughed and rushed to kiss him. He wanted to taste the happiness in his kiss. They kissed passionately, only breaking off because Teddy was there, waiting expectantly.

"Are you married now?" he asked.

They laughed.

"Almost," Alec said and pulled Teddy over to them for a hug.

"We're engaged," Cory told him. "When we get married, Alec's mom will be there and a bunch of other people too, and there will be a big cake."

He and Alec were still kneeling on the porch, and Teddy looked at them curiously.

"Are you waiting for something?" he asked them.

"Why?" Cory wondered.

"Get Mayor Miriam and the other people so you can get married and

eat cake," Teddy told them impatiently.

"He can't wait either," Alec said and pulled Cory into an embrace. "Some things are worth waiting for." He kissed Cory not letting go of him until Teddy got bored, huffed and went back to his drawing.

Alec and Cory cuddled on the porch steps, waiting for night to fall so they could make love for the first time as an engaged couple.

*

Alec couldn't wait for everyone else to go to bed, and he wasn't the only one. Once they were alone, Cory practically ripped his clothes off.

"Save some for the rest of our lives," Alec told him as he stripped Cory with more dignity.

Cory grinned at him, less fierce now that he was reminded of all the time they had together. His kisses were gentle, his caress maddeningly feathery over Alec's hot skin. The light touch tickled Alec until Cory pounced on him. He laid him flat on the bed and pinned him down. That aggressive look was in his eyes again. With an animal hunger, he kissed Alec's mouth. Then Cory's tongue traced every bulge and valley of his body as his hands traveled over the rest, wanting to cover all of him.

He was so ravenous, Alec didn't know if he could ever satisfy him. Good thing he had a lifetime to try. For now he let him go wild trying to express how he felt with every fiber of his being. Alec did the same, saying "I love you" with every thrust.

That night Cory whispered Alec's name a thousand times until Alec collapsed, bones melted, muscles overworked. He dropped on top of Cory to kiss him.

"Never forget that you are mine," Cory said to him.

"How could I forget? You took my body, my heart, and my soul," Alec said, running his hands over him and kissing him.

"I'm never giving them back," Cory said and held Alec even tighter as they kissed.

This was it. This was what Alec had been searching for. Some part of him knew that there was a feeling, a man, and a life waiting for him. Cory embodied all of it. Alec was holding his whole life in his arms.

"I can't believe I almost lost you," Alec said. He couldn't believe he had ever fought against this.

"You were never going to lose me. I love you too much," Cory said. His eyes blazed then turned soft.

"I'm going to make you so happy," Alec vowed.

"You are going to drive me crazy," Cory corrected him. "I'm already

happy. All I want is to be with you."

Alec took his hand and threaded his fingers through Cory's. He looked deep into his eyes.

"I still need to paint you, but I'm not sure I know how to put this much love on canvas."

"Teddy does. He'll teach you."

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There is a new painting in the Benchley's living room. It's signed Teddy Bledsoe. Mostly it's a painting of a giant wedding cake. There are some people around it. It's hard to tell who is who except for the two grooms and the happy little boy between them.

The end

Books by Trina Solet:

~*And Manny Makes Three* - Mark is a struggling college student who has been working as a nanny for a nice family, but they don't need him any more. Zack has been raising his son, Al, by himself and needs help. Al is a funny kid, and Zack is a funny dad, but more serious issues lurk under the surface. Will Mark be able to deal with these two? And how will Zack and Mark deal with their mutual attraction?

~*Unexpected Dad* - Tyler finds a big surprise waiting on his doorstep. Ready or not, Tyler is a dad. Tyler didn't know he had a daughter until she suddenly dropped into his life. Whether he is ready for her or not, little Julie needs a father. Or maybe two. Tyler and Jake have been best friends, inseparable since college. Now they have to adjust to Tyler's new role as a dad. As Jake helps him cope with being a new father to a little girl, Tyler might be looking at two big changes in his life.

~*More Than a Manny* - A very young, rich widower needs a nanny, but a hot manny would be even better. That's where Nate comes in. Brent is a loving but irresponsible father to two young children from a marriage of convenience. He needs Nate in his life, but how will Nate, a first time nanny, fit into his unconventional household? The kids are a handful, especially little Georgie. Her big brother, Ricky, has a few issues of his own. But Nate is more than ready to take on the challenge and let all three of them steal his heart.

~*Duncan the Third* - Patrick and his little sister, Wendy, have just moved into Duncan's building and that means trouble. Patrick is exactly the kind of guy Duncan can't resist. Together he and his little sister might be the family Duncan has been yearning for but only if he takes a chance and lets them into his heart. Unfortunately, Duncan

hasn't been lucky when it comes to relationships. After getting his heart broken too many times, he has sworn off younger men. While Duncan struggles against his attraction to him, Patrick is determined to win him over. As Patrick tries to change his mind, can he also heal Duncan's broken heart?

~*His True Home* - Alec has retreated to his childhood home after a life of too much fun. When a little boy is abandoned on the road leading to Alec's home town of Seaview Pines, Alec is the one who ends up taking care of him. Now Cory is on his way to join them. He was abandoned by his mother as well and wants to give Teddy, his little brother, the family he never had. As they spend time together, it's up to Cory to draw out the serious, silent little boy. He also has to convince Alec that his home town isn't just a temporary refuge. It's where all three of them belong.

~*Poison Heart* - Is there anything Vince and Cal won't do for each other? The two of them grew up together and fell deeply in love. They were poor but happy until Cal made a big mistake and ended up in jail. He did it for Vince. To get him out, Vince is willing to do anything. Roland Granger has the power and influence to make Cal a free man. All he wants in return is Vince. Even if Cal never forgives him, Vince is willing to sacrifice himself. Now he has to make sure that Cal accepts this unwanted help. And while Vince is trying to set things right in his own life, can he reunite Roland with a self-destructive young man who loves him?

~*Make It Better* - A favor leads to a life changing experience. Ray is willing to do anything for the man he considers his savior. His mission of mercy is Marcus, a young man who can’t overcome his guilt over a tragedy in his past. Is Ray making a terrible mistake giving his heart to him, or will his love for Marcus be strong enough to save him?

~*My Love Is Real: The Benson Brothers Story* - For almost a year Sean and Brian thought they were brothers. Sean wants him more than anything, but will Brian ever accept his love? His pride is only one of the obstacles standing in their way. A dangerous man has a claim on Brian.

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